

BEHIND THE VEIL OF THE VILLAGE: A WOMANIST PRACTICAL THEOLOGICAL  
ANALYSIS OF SINGLE AFRICAN AMERICAN MOTHERS, CULTURAL AND  
RELATIONAL TRAUMA, AND RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION PROGRAMS

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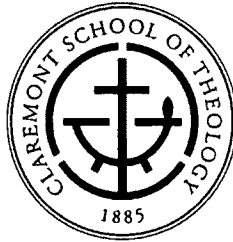
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May 2014

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## ABSTRACT

### BEHIND THE VEIL OF THE VILLAGE: A WOMANIST PRACTICAL THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF SINGLE AFRICAN AMERICAN MOTHERS, CULTURAL AND RELATIONAL TRAUMA, AND RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION PROGRAMS

by

Trina Avetta Armstrong

Relationship education services use premarital and marriage curriculums to provide individuals and couples with the skills that are presumed to be needed to make healthy relationship choices for entering or maintaining a marriage. Drawing on psychological and sociological research overwhelmingly correlating marriage with child well being, these services were incorporated in the Federal Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 and the Claims Resolution Act of 2010, when the U.S. government appropriated over \$750 million through the Healthy Marriage Initiative (HMI) to promote and fund marriage and fatherhood programs.

The HMI was touted by conservative politicians as a poverty alleviation and community improvement strategy for reducing welfare dependence and social problems attributed to single African American mothers. The HMI intentionally targeted the African American community by promoting marriage through the African American Healthy Marriage Initiative (AAHMI), a targeted HMI initiative using culturally relevant relationship education services intending to strengthen African-American families for the well being of children.

Despite the HMI/AAHMI's marriage promotion agenda, research has shown that



learning and improving relationship skills can be beneficial for overall health and well being. However, because these curricula couch these skills in relation to marriage, they disregard the well being of single African American mothers who head over half of the families in the African American community. Though single African American mothers can use relationship education services, the curricula do not address relational and cultural traumas affecting their well being, quality of life, and interpersonal relationships with their children and significant others.

The purpose of this dissertation is twofold. First, it examines the cultural and relational factors that contribute to the pain and suffering of single African American mothers. Second, with the information gained from the first task, it will suggest revisions to the general ethos and content of existing relationship curricula for single African American mothers. Specific attention focuses on the post-traumatic effect of cultural controlling images and on mourning relationship loss as significant effects on the quality of life of single African American mothers. Through interviews with a small representative sample of single African American mothers, I examine how they perceive the myths and stereotypes imposed on them by patriarchal, sexist, and racist systems. I also emphasize their thoughts and feelings about the effect of interpersonal violence and multiple losses on their quality of life, interpersonal relationships, and well being.

This analysis will inform the content of a revised relationship education curriculum that can be used as a resource for pastoral care and counseling in black churches. I argue that relationship education services contextualized to explore the effects of relational and cultural traumas in the lives of single African American mothers will help them learn new relationship skills, build on existing strengths for the benefit of *all*

their interpersonal relationships, especially relationships with their children, and heal. In attending to single African American mothers' well being, we will also be attending to the well being of their children.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### Chapter

1. Single African American Mothers from Margin to Center.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Research Problem .....	13
Background of Research Problem .....	13
The Enduring Crisis of the African American Family.....	13
The Healthy Marriage Initiative and Family Values .....	15
Single African American Mothers and Welfare Reform .....	20
The African American Healthy Marriage Initiative.....	23
Relationship Education Curricula and Single African American Mothers.....	27
Thesis .....	34
Definition of Terms.....	39
Scope and Limitations.....	44
Importance and Contribution .....	45
Relevant Literature.....	46
Psychosocial Research on Single African American Mothers .....	48
African American Women in Pastoral Care and Counseling .....	51
Interpersonal Violence .....	54
Womanist Models of Pastoral Care and Counseling .....	57
Organization of Chapters .....	59
Summary .....	61
2. Description of Hermeneutical and Research Methodology .....	62
Practical Theology and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis .....	62
Introduction.....	62
Rationale for Practical Theological Method .....	63
Hermeneutical Method: Four Tasks of Contemporary Practical Theology .....	66
Womanist Practical Theology .....	68

Womanist Practical Theology and Single African American Mothers .....	70
Research Method: Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis .....	72
Research Participants .....	74
Data Collection .....	76
Data Analysis .....	78
Validity and Reliability .....	79
Self-Reflexive Process .....	81
Summary .....	84
3. Behind the Veil of the Village .....	85
Examining the Lives of Single African American Mothers .....	85
Introduction .....	85
Profiles of the Research Participants .....	86
Results .....	96
Emergent Themes .....	98
Challenges of Single African American Mothers .....	98
Judged and Stereotyped .....	109
Coping with Challenges and Stereotypes .....	114
Trauma, Loss, and Abandonment .....	118
Self-Evaluation .....	124
Experiences of God, Religion and Church .....	128
Summary .....	132
4. Cultural and Historical Context of Single African American Mothers .....	133
Cultural Trauma, Coping, and Strategies of Resistance .....	133
Introduction .....	133
Cultural Trauma .....	134
Trauma .....	134
Controlling Images .....	137
Cultural Trauma in Historical Context .....	141
Cultural Trauma, Coping, and Strategies of Resistance .....	151
Cultural Trauma and Relational Cultural Theory .....	162

Patriarchy and the Social Construction of Single African American Mothers.....	167
Single African American Mothers, Patriarchy, Heterosexism, and the Black Church .....	174
Summary .....	179
5. The Relational Context of Single African American Mothers .....	181
Relational Trauma.....	181
Introduction.....	181
The Elements of Relational Trauma .....	182
Interpersonal Violence .....	184
Unusual and Ambiguous Loss .....	187
Disenfranchised Loss and Grief.....	190
The Black Church and Relational Trauma.....	198
Pastoral and Psychological Perspectives on Pain and Suffering .....	200
Silence and Suffering .....	202
Summary .....	204
6. A Womanist Practical Theology of Connection .....	206
Attending to the Well Being of Single African American Mothers .....	206
Introduction.....	206
Theological Reflection: Jesus and the Woman at the Well .....	207
Enfranchising Loss and Grief .....	214
Evoking Communal and Self Empathy.....	214
From Silence to Voice: Naming Loss.....	216
Honoring Disenfranchised Loss and Grief through Ritual .....	217
Enlivening Images of Single African American Motherhood .....	219
Embracing Life-Giving Womanist Self Images and God Images .....	219
Embracing Motherhood as Continuum of Life and Communal Practice .....	221
A Womanist Practical Theology of Family Ministry .....	221
A Relational God: Theological Foundations of Family.....	225
We Are <i>All</i> Family .....	225
An Inclusive Family Ministry .....	227



Summary .....	228
7. Pastoral Care and Counseling with Single African American Mothers .....	229
Introduction.....	229
Womanist, Educative, and Growth Group Pastoral Care and Counseling .....	229
Revised Relationship Education Curriculum.....	232
Learning Goals and Objectives.....	232
Content.....	233
Leadership and Growth-Group Process .....	235
Exercises to Foster Growth and Healing .....	236
Summary .....	237
8. Dissertation Summary.....	239
Conclusion and Reflections .....	239
Future Research .....	242
Appendixes .....	244
A. Semi-Structured Interview Questions .....	244
B. Letter of Informed Consent .....	245
Bibliography .....	247

## Chapter 1

### 1. Single African American Mothers from Margin to Center

#### Introduction

Single African American mothers are the antithesis of America's yearning for a pristine, peaceful, and idealized society of happily-married-self-sufficient nuclear families--families with a mother, father, and well-behaved children. Despite overwhelming evidence that this idealized society will never be realized, racism, sexism, heterosexism, and patriarchy continue to dictate the rights and privileges of others. Those who do not conform live with the political, economic, social, and emotional consequences of tainting this imagined place of liberty and justice for all. Nowhere is this more exemplified than in the denigration, stigmatization, and marginalization of single African American mothers in scholarly research, social policies, the media, and religious institutions.

The most recent U.S. census reports that single African American mothers head 49.7 percent of African American families and rear over 70 percent of African American children under eighteen.<sup>1</sup> These statistics along with the challenges faced by welfare-dependent single African American mothers receive the most public and research attention. Unfortunately, this monolithic view overlooks middle-class; college educated; and professionally employed single African American mothers who face similar challenges that are not regularly noted. The circumstances in which we find ourselves parenting alone are also diverse. Some of us are single mothers by choice, widowhood, divorce, or abandonment by our children's fathers. Some single African American

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<sup>1</sup> U. S. Bureau of the Census, "Households and Families, 2010," under "Household Type by Race and Hispanic Origin," <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-14.pdf> (accessed March 22, 2011).

mothers receive support from the fathers of their children. Supportive families surround others. Regardless of this diversity, the challenges faced by significant portions of single African American mothers are ignored unless “they can be evoked as a means of pathologizing black family life.”<sup>2</sup> Though statistics are a useful gauge of African American family and marital patterns, they reveal only part of these women’s lives. Without hearing from us, beliefs about single African American mothers are promulgated by researchers, politicians, and the media through a host of myths and stereotypes such as *matriarchs*, *social problems*, *welfare queens*, illegitimate families, *strong black women*, and more recently, *baby mamas*. Ultimately, the challenges we face are overshadowed by theories focusing on the formation of our families instead of our humanity.

I use the pronouns *we*, *us*, and *our*, because I am not an uninterested researcher, I am a single African American mother. I know first-hand that we are criticized for many problems in African-American communities. Although single-parent households are growing across the racial spectrum, single African American mothers are among the most maligned sub-populations in America. This castigation screams that we abuse welfare, are sexually irresponsible, uneducated, angry, and that we do not let our children’s fathers head our homes. Some sociologist, psychologist, and politicians theorize that our fatherless homes will harm our children because they are more likely to commit crimes; have difficulty in school; become unwed-teen parents; and have emotional and behavioral problems. An example supporting this theory is an oft-cited study, *Growing up with a single parent: what hurts and what helps*, where sociologist Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur posit that children raised by one biological parent are worse off than those raised by both biological parents.

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<sup>2</sup> bell hooks, *Salvation: black people and love* (New York: Perennial, 2001), 115.

Children who grow up in a household with only one biological parent are worse off, on average, than children who grow up in a household with both of their biological parents, regardless of the parent's race or educational background, regardless of whether the parents are married when the child is born, and regardless of whether the resident parent remarries. Compared with teenagers of similar background who grow up with both parents at home, adolescents who have lived apart from one of their parents during some period of their childhood are twice as likely to drop out of high school, twice as likely to have a child before age twenty, and one and a half times as likely to be "idle"—out of school and out of work—in their late teens and early twenties.<sup>3</sup>

Although their research findings also contend that there are many other reasons for these social problems, they clearly privilege *nuclear families* for nurturing healthy children.

This is important for the argument I outline in this study.

Among African Americans, I agree with McLanahan and Sandefur that there are many reasons African-American children fail as successful adults. Aside from arguments about nuclear families and children well being, many urban African American communities are plagued by the disproportionate prevalence of homicide; black-on-black gang violence; illicit drug distribution and abuse; homelessness; incarceration; HIV and AIDS; other sexually transmitted diseases; interpersonal violence; and disturbing family fragmentation trends. Though some adolescents, teenagers, and young adults experiencing these problems are not products of single-mother homes, those from single-mother homes are often blamed for them. Because of this, many, who I name later in this study, believe these problems will be resolved when single mothers marry at higher rates than current statistical trends. Some black churches across the United States have joined federal government efforts to encourage marriage and responsible fatherhood through the 2006 Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Act and the 2010 Claims Resolution Act.

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<sup>3</sup> Sara McLanahan and Gary D. Sandefur, *Growing up with a single parent: what hurts, what helps* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 1-2.

Over the last seven years, the federal government funded the Healthy Marriage Initiatives (HMI) with millions of welfare dollars to enhance the well being of children by strengthening families through healthy marriage and relationship education services. A targeted cultural initiative, The African American Healthy Marriage Initiative (AAHMI), was created for African Americans to strengthen families, encourage responsible fatherhood, improve child well being, and help the men and women who choose marriage, develop the necessary skills to form and sustain healthy marriages.<sup>4</sup> I refer to both initiatives throughout the dissertation as HMI and AAHMI.

This is a worthy goal for the regeneration and quality of life for African American people because we often refer to the *village* with pride as reminiscent of the African adage, *It takes a village to raise a child*. Originating in African culture, villages are the families, clans, and tribes who were collectively responsible for the well being of children and anyone in need.<sup>5</sup> In spite of our slave legacy, this communal organization is credited with ensuring our survival. However, I contend that the village is also a form of protection or a veil covering the pain and suffering of single African American mothers. In this study, I show that a significant aspect of this pain and suffering relates to some sociologists, politicians, and clergy's silence about interpersonal violence and unresolved grief in African American interpersonal relationships.

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<sup>4</sup> Administration for Children and Families, "African American Healthy Marriage Initiative," <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/region6/african-american-healthy-marriage-initiative> (accessed March 23, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> It is thought to be an African, possibly even a Native American proverb. However, its origin is uncertain. Researchers who have sought the proverb's origin believe that it is a collection of African sayings about community and family combined into the proverb. Several authors use the proverb in their work, for example Jane Cowen-Fletcher's *It Takes a Village*. The book, published in the mid-1990s, is about children in an African village. Perhaps the most famous usage of the proverb comes from Hillary Clinton. She popularized the term in her 1996 book, *It Takes a Village: And Other Lessons Children Teach Us*. Clinton reinforced the principles of the proverb when she advocated for every aspect of society to collectively meet *all* of our children's needs.

An aspect of this silence is akin to African-American law professor Katheryn Russell-Brown's theory of "black protectionism." In *Protecting Our Own: Race, Crime, and African Americans*, Russell-Brown explains that this *protective* response by large numbers of the African American community denies, excuses, or minimizes charges or allegations against prominent African Americans who have engaged in a criminal act or ethical violation.<sup>6</sup> Notable examples of black protectionism are the high-profile cases of O.J. Simpson and Clarence Thomas. Sadly, both were accused of interpersonal violence against women—a white woman and African American, respectively. Simpson, a retired professional football player, was acquitted for murdering his white ex-wife and her boyfriend. Thomas, a supreme court Justice, was accused of sexually harassing his former employee, Anita Hill, during his senate confirmation hearings and was still confirmed. Both Simpson and Thomas received overwhelming support from the African American community, especially in the case of Thomas. His cry of racism and his description of the hearings as a "high-tech lynching" silenced Anita's Hill's cry for justice when she was criticized for being a "fantasying, zealoting civil rights believer," and "vengeful scorned" woman.<sup>7</sup>

Clarence Thomas harsh remarks about Anita Hill were the consequences she endured for unveiling his patriarchal-and-sexist-fueled abuse *and* for violating the unwritten African American code of silence.<sup>8</sup> This exemplifies the unequal *protection* afforded to African American men versus African American women. Despite the

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<sup>6</sup> Katheryn Russell-Brown, *Protecting our own: race, crime, and African Americans* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Hearing on the Nomination of Clarence Thomas to be Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States*, 102nd Cong., 1st sess. 1991, 157-58.

<sup>8</sup> Donna L. Franklin, *What's love got to do with it?: understanding and healing the rift between black men and women* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 184.

backlash, Hill transcended this pervasive culture of silence trapping many African American women in their own pain and suffering, when she heeded Audre Lorde's caution that silence "will not protect you."<sup>9</sup>

As an African American woman, I understand the philosophy, and historical context of *black protectionism* and I participated in this silence as a form of racial solidarity that rests on this question, if we do not protect our own from perceived racist attacks, who will? According to historian Darlene Clark-Hine, this racial solidarity was nurtured in slavery where slaves were taught, to never reveal to white people anything that could possibly harm another slave. Subsequently, African American parents nurtured children at a very early age with the mindset that family and community came first.<sup>10</sup>

Although remnants of black protectionism continue to linger amongst many African American people, there is evidence that some community organizations, black churches, and high-profile African Americans are willing to publicly address concerns about increasing family fragmentation trends. Over the last ten years, there have been gatherings, primarily discussing and proposing solutions for absent fathers; high divorce rates; low marriage rates; out-of-wedlock births; and strategies for increasing marriage. One example is *The Conference on the Black Family*, hosted by Hampton University.<sup>11</sup> Several high-profile African Americans have also weighed in theorizing about absent fathers, and the disproportionate number of out-of-wed-lock births in the African American community. For example, actor, and philanthropist Bill Cosby and then

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<sup>9</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister outsider: essays and speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 41.

<sup>10</sup> Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson, *A shining thread of hope: the history of Black women in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1998), 72.

<sup>11</sup> Hampton University, "The Conference on the Black Family," <http://events.hamptonu.edu/cbf/> (accessed March 27, 2014). Since 1978, Hampton University, a historically black college and university, in Virginia holds an annual conference to address issues facing black families.

presidential candidate Senator Barack Obama's remarks about the state of the black family received the most attention.

Bill Cosby received mixed reactions to his very candid statements about the behavior, and parenting of poor African Americans during his acceptance speech at a gala sponsored by the NAACP, NAACP Legal Fund, and Howard University's commemoration of the fifteenth anniversary of the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision. Cosby began his acceptance speech with a long diatribe castigating single African American mothers. This is a portion of the speech as transcribed in the *American Rhetoric Online Speech Bank*:

Ladies and gentlemen, the lower economic and lower middle economic people are not holding their end in this deal. In the neighborhood that most of us grew up in, parenting is not going on. In the old days, you couldn't hooky school because every drawn shade was an eye. And before your mother got off the bus and to the house, she knew exactly where you had gone who had gone into the house, and where you got on whatever you had one and where you got it from. Parents don't know that today. I'm talking about these people who cry when their son is standing there in an orange suit. Where were you when he was two? Where were you when he was twelve? Where were you when he was eighteen, and how come you don't know he had a pistol? And where is his father, and why don't you know where he is? And why doesn't the father show up to talk to this boy?... Fifty percent dropout rate, I'm telling you, and people in jail, and women having children by five, six different men. Under what excuse? I want somebody to love me. And as soon as you have it, you forget to parent. Grandmother, mother, and great grandmother in the same room, raising children, and the child knows nothing about love or respect of any one of the three of them. All this child knows is "gimme, gimme, gimme." These people want to buy the friendship of a child, and the child couldn't care less. Those of us sitting out here who have gone on to some college or whatever we've done, we still fear our parents. And these people are not parenting. They're buying things for the kid -- \$500 sneakers -- for what? They won't buy or spend \$250 on Hooked on Phonics.<sup>12</sup>

Senator Barack Obama's Father's Day speech at the Apostolic Church of God in Chicago during his presidential candidacy raised critical awareness about the effect of

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<sup>12</sup> Bill Cosby, "Address at the NAACP on the 50th Anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education," American Rhetoric Online Speech Bank, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/billcosbypoundcakespeech.htm> (accessed October 14, 2013).



absent fathers on the African American community. Although much of what he quoted has been used in research affirming the *culture of poverty* and *social problem* theories, his statements are noteworthy because of their public nature. Though much of his speech focused on absent fathers, he also pleaded for help for women left behind to raise the children alone and made clear his belief about the value of two parents.

We need to help all the mothers out there who are raising these kids by themselves; the mothers who drop them off at school, go to work, pick up them up in the afternoon, work another shift, get dinner, make lunches, pay the bills, fix the house, and all the other things it takes both parents to do. So many of these women are doing a heroic job, but they need support. They need another parent. Their children need another parent. That's what keeps their foundation strong. It's what keeps the foundation of our country strong.... If we are honest with ourselves, we'll admit that what too many fathers also are is missing - missing from too many lives and too many homes. They have abandoned their responsibilities, acting like boys instead of men. And the foundations of our families are weaker because of it... You and I know how true this is in the African-American community. We know that more than half of all black children live in single-parent households, a number that has doubled - doubled - since we were children. We know the statistics - that children who grow up without a father are five times more likely to live in poverty and commit crime; nine times more likely to drop out of schools and twenty times more likely to end up in prison. They are more likely to have behavioral problems, or run away from home, or become teenage parents themselves. And the foundations of our community are weaker because of it.”<sup>13</sup>

Though Cosby and Obama's public comments raised concerns about the interior life of the African American family's effect on African American children, long-time African American clergy and social justice activist, Rev. Jesse Jackson, Sr. exhibited black protectionism when he castigated Obama for “talking down to black people.”<sup>14</sup> Sociologist and theologian Michael Eric Dyson criticized Cosby's rant in a similar vein

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<sup>13</sup> Associated Press, “Obama's Father's Day Speech Urges Black Fathers to be More Engaged in Raising Their Children,” *Huffington Post*, June 23, 2008, accessed March 23 2011, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/06/15/obamas-fathers-day-speech\\_n\\_107220.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/06/15/obamas-fathers-day-speech_n_107220.html)

<sup>14</sup> Jeff Zeleny, “Jesse Jackson Apologizes to Remarks on Obama,” *New York Times*, July 10, 2008, accessed March 23, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/10/us/politics/10jackson.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/10/us/politics/10jackson.html?_r=0)

as sociologist William Ryan's ideology of "blaming the victim."<sup>15</sup> In his book, *Is Bill Cosby Right?: Or Has the Black Middle Class Lost Its Mind?*, Dyson writes,

Cosby's overemphasis on personal responsibility, not structural features, wrongly locates the source of poor black suffering—and by implication its remedy—in the lives of the poor. When you think the problems are personal, you think the solutions are the same. If only the poor are willing to work harder, act better, get educated, stay out of jail and parent more effectively, their problems would go away. It's hard to argue against any of these things in the abstract; in principle such suggestions sound just fine. But, one could do all of these things and still be in bad shape at home, work, or school.<sup>16</sup>

Dyson's counterargument lambasted Cosby for blaming instead of defending what he calls the *Ghettocracy*, "single mothers on welfare, single working mothers and fathers, poor fathers, married poor and working folk, the incarcerated, and a battalion of impoverished children."<sup>17</sup>

Jackson's castigation of Obama's remarks echoes African-American revisionist scholar's response to the 1965 Moynihan report. The Moynihan report argued that abnormal family formation patterns caused the prevalence of single African American mothers. Revisionist scholars challenged Moynihan's thesis, and other negative stereotypes, images and pathologizing theories about African-American family life by focusing on the endurance, resiliency, and strength of black families and single African American mothers. In her research on African American intimate relationships, sociologist Shirley Hill believes that the revisionists' lack of critical analysis on single African American mother families has affected their well being and the well being of their children. She writes,

One legacy of revisionist scholarship has been its challenge to the deviancy

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<sup>15</sup> William Ryan, *Blaming the Victim*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage, 1976), 5.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, *Is Bill Cosby right?: or has the Black middle class lost its mind?* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2005), 5.

<sup>17</sup> Dyson, *Is Bill Cosby right?*, xiii–xiv.

discourse on black families, but another has been silencing almost any critical analysis of the harmful family patterns caused by poverty and oppression. Contesting racial stigma has often left us inadvertently romanticizing behaviors that once contributed to our survival but are now found disproportionately among the poor and are inimical to their well-being. The revisionist work of the civil rights era heralded the strengths of black families. Including those headed by single mothers, as generations of black people have grown up in such families and gone on to live successful, productive lives. The fact that single-mother families are remarkably diverse in their resources, support networks, and the ability to rear children warrants rejecting the notion that they are inherently dysfunctional. But despite this diversity, most single black mothers are poor, increasingly socially isolated, and in many cases unable to protect their children from myriad threats to their safety, development, and well-being.<sup>18</sup>

I agree with some of the issues that both Obama and Cosby raise. We (the African American community, federal government, and black churches) should provide support to single mothers who have limited financial and emotional resources to help their children thrive. I also argue that the best-case scenario is for children to be nurtured into healthy adults by their *healthy* biological parents. However, I also believe that alternative family forms and arrangements are capable of raising healthy children. I contend, like Cosby, that parents should bear some responsibility for their children's behavior; however, he assumes that African American parents can nurture healthy children into responsible adults when many have not had good nurturing from their own parents. In the larger scheme of these accusatory conversations between African American leaders, instead of placing blame on parents or society, a case could be made for relationship education to strengthen single African American mothers and their children.

I argue that the HMI/AAHMI's focus on helping parents improve their relationship skills to create healthier homes, and children can address some of Cosby's concerns and the underlying current of the social problems in African American

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<sup>18</sup> Shirley A. Hill, *Black intimacies: a gender perspective on families and relationships* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2005), 204.

communities. However, I disagree with the philosophy of the HMI/AAHMI, which argues for strengthening families based, on *familism*. Practical theologian Don Browning describes familism as a pro-family cultural attitude promoting heterosexual marriage at any cost and neglects to investigate alternatives to the nuclear (mother-father dyad with children), breadwinner-homemaker industrial, family ideal.<sup>19</sup> This study's reference to the nuclear family is based on George Murdock's notion of *family* as a social structure. In *Social Structure*,<sup>20</sup> he argued that all families are organized around the basic structural group of a heterosexual married couple and their children. HMI/AAHMI supporters contend that this model of family is best for providing for the physical, financial, and emotional well being of children. In contrast, Browning argues for *critical familism*, a concept that supports the non-patriarchal and egalitarian nuclear family.<sup>21</sup> Though critical familism too emphasizes the mother-father dyad, it also argues for "basic support for and connection with already existing families of single parents ..." <sup>22</sup> Or as legal scholar Martha Fineman proposes, a radical restructuring of society to provide basic support

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<sup>19</sup> Don S. Browning et al., *From culture wars to common ground: religion and the American family debate* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 2.

<sup>20</sup> George Peter Murdock, *Social structure* (New York: Macmillan, 1949).

<sup>21</sup> Browning et al., *From culture wars to common ground*, 2-3. Browning and his colleagues developed the concept of *critical familism* as part of the Religion, Culture, and Family Project. In the signature work of this project, *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate*, critical familism is the organizing principal of the multi-authored volume. Browning et al. argues for a critical culture of marriage that entails "full equality between husband and wife and a commitment to the reflection, communication, and openness needed to implement it. This requires an analysis of the power relations between husband, wife, and children, and surrounding economic and governmental institutions so that hidden blocks and resistances to a realized equal regard can be uncovered and corrected. A critical familism and marriage culture also require an analysis and restructuring of the ecology of supports for families so that extended family, church, civil society, government, and market can be helpful to the conjugal couple and their children; it also requires, in turn, that families themselves contribute to the common good. In addition, a critical familism entails explicit recognition of those situations of violence, abuse, addiction, and exploitation in which intervention and possibly family dissolution may be necessary. Finally, critical familism involves basic support for and connection with already existing families of single parents, stepparents, adults called to a vocation of singleness, and gays and lesbians raising children."

<sup>22</sup> Browning et al., *From culture wars to common ground*, 3.

services to all caretakers who nurture children.<sup>23</sup>

I privilege both Browning's critical familism and Finemans' call for a society that provides support to anyone who lacks the resources needed to raise children in an environment where they can flourish. Within these two intersecting issues, First, I argue that the content and pedagogical approach of the HMI/AAHMI's sanctioned relationship education curricula should reflect an egalitarian philosophy of relationships within diverse family forms. Most importantly, if the HMI/AAHMI and its black church constituents aim to strengthen African American families to ensure the well being of children, they cannot ignore seventy percent of African American children living in female-headed households. Thus, in using relationship education as a significant part of their strengthening efforts, the cultural and family ethos should include the well being of single African American mothers despite their intention to marry. Second, I argue that the AAHMI's working assumption that the problems in African American communities can be resolved by ensuring heterosexual marriage as the norm for African Americas is a Band-Aid approach covering single African American mothers' pain and suffering from cultural and relational trauma. I define both terms—cultural trauma and relational trauma—in the definition section of this chapter, and I explain them more fully in chapters four and five.

Despite society's perceptions about single African American mothers, we did not intend to be single parents. In fact, we would gladly welcome the financial and emotional support of our children's fathers. Even more significant is the way in which these perceptions fail to acknowledge our stories of abusive relationships, absent fathers, and

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<sup>23</sup> Martha Albertson Fineman, *The neutered mother, the sexual family, and other twentieth century tragedies* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 9.

unrealized hopes, and dreams that the overwhelming task of parenting alone will not harm our children. An overt focus on family structure silences this pain and suffering. All can have a profound effect on our well being and the well being of our children.

In this dissertation, I examine the lives of a small representative and yet diverse sample of single African American mothers to understand their experiences: how they became single mothers; how they describe and cope with the challenges of being the sole caregiver of their children; and, I wanted to know how they understand and deal with cultural, media, and religious perceptions of single African American mothers. This brings me to the goal of this dissertation: to propose a pastoral care and counseling approach for black churches utilizing the resources of relationship education to strengthen single African American mothers.

### Research Problem

The AAHMI/HMI purports to improve child well being by strengthening families using relationship education services that promote the ideology of the nuclear family, but these services discriminate against single African American mothers who are raising most African American children while they cope with cultural and relational trauma.

### Background of Research Problem

#### The Enduring Crisis of the African American Family

In a *New York Times* article written by author Kay Hymowitz, *An Enduring Crisis for the Black Family*, she describes the growing trend of single African American mothers and their fatherless children as an “enduring crisis” of the African American family.<sup>24</sup> She argues, like many researchers before her, that the consequences of this

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<sup>24</sup> Kay S. Hymowitz, “An Enduring Crisis for the Black Family,” *Washington Post*, December 6, 2008, accessed March 23, 2011, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp->

crisis are poverty and social problems that have a profound multigenerational impact on these children. Her expanded discussion, in *Marriage and Caste in America*, focuses on the correlation between poverty and single African American mothers. Hymowitz is one of the few scholars who believe that the U.S. federal government missed an opportunity to respond to emerging signs of this crisis in 1965 when Daniel Patrick Moynihan argued for government action and support for single African American mothers and African American families in *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*.<sup>25</sup>

I say more about the Moynihan report shortly; however, I contend that the unfortunate criticism about key concerns in Moynihan's report prevented any helpful government action and like Hill argues, led African American revisionist scholars to counteract the report's findings with *only* positive characteristics of single African American mothers. Notable revisionist scholars who responded to the Moynihan Report are: Andrew Billingsley, Carol Stack, and Robert Hill. In *Black Families in White America*, Billingsley wrote, that the African American family is "an absorbing adaptive, and amazingly resilient mechanism for the socialization of its children and the civilization of society."<sup>26</sup> Hill claimed in *The Strengths of Black Families*, that many single parent African American families have more positive outcomes than single-parent white families and that one-parent families are more cohesive than many two-parent families.<sup>27</sup> In Stack's work, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community*, like Billingsley, she agrees that poor families are adaptive and resilient and embedded in

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[dyn/content/article/2008/12/05/AR2008120503088.html](http://dyn/content/article/2008/12/05/AR2008120503088.html)

<sup>25</sup> Kay S. Hymowitz, *Marriage and caste in America: separate and unequal families in a post-marital age* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), 3.

<sup>26</sup> Andrew Billingsley, *Black families in white America* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 33.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Bernard Hill, *The strengths of Black families* (New York: Emerson Hall, 1972), 60-70.

cooperative domestic exchange in an organized, active lifelong network.<sup>28</sup>

During the ten years that these (and others) were published, any legitimate concerns about single African American mothers and the well being of their children was not addressed as much as Moynihan hoped. Almost forty years after the Moynihan report, new concerns about single African American mothers and their children resurfaced in welfare discourses about the correlation between marriage, poverty, child well being, and social problems in many impoverished African American communities. Subsequently, the federal government has responded with the HMI and AAHMI as a course-of-action advancing a nuclear-family-values philosophy of marriage for strengthening African American families in the interest of children.

#### The Healthy Marriage Initiative and Family Values

The HMI is the brainchild of Wade F. Horn (then Assistant Secretary for the Administration of Children and Families and a child psychologist by training) and former President George W. Bush. Through the 2006 Deficit Reduction Act, they successfully persuaded congress to divert \$150 million dollars per year for five years from other welfare programs to the HMI. Subsequently, 226 organizations received funding to promote the values of marriage; conduct research on marriage; develop relationship education curricula; and hold classes on premarital and marriage skills enhancement. In accordance with the government's concern for child well being, relationship education is key to the HMI's overall marriage-promotion goal of helping married couples who have chosen marriage for themselves, acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to form and

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<sup>28</sup> Carol B. Stack, *All our kin: strategies for survival in a Black community* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 124.



sustain a healthy marriage.<sup>29</sup> Relationship education teaches expecting couples, cohabitating couples, and high-school youth the skills, attitudes, and behaviors that are assumed to be needed to form and maintain healthy marriages.

When Horn and Bush *values* proposed the HMI before Congress in 2002, they made their value-laden beliefs about *family*, marriage and child well being clear and the *marriage movement* became public. The *marriage movement*, organized by a group of religious leaders, scholars, think-tank personnel, and community activist, supports the organization of families and care giving of children using the ideologies of heterosexism, patriarchy, and familism. In the group's 2002 published document, *The Marriage Movement: A State of Principles*, they proclaimed, "We will turn the tide on marriage and reduce divorce and unmarried childbearing, so that each year more children will grow up protected by their own two happily married parents and more adults' marriage dreams will come true."<sup>30</sup>

Language about marriage and child well being is embedded through ought the Personal Responsibility and Work Act (PRWOA), a federal law that replaced the perennial-welfare program, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). For example, the first lines of the new federal law begin with "Congress makes the following findings: Marriage is the foundation of a successful society. Marriage is an essential institution of a successful society that promotes the interests of children. Promotion of responsible fatherhood and motherhood is integral to successful child rearing and the well

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<sup>29</sup> Robert E. Rector and Melissa G. Pardue, "Understanding the President's Healthy Marriage Initiative," Heritage Foundation Backgrounder no. 1741, [www.heritage.org/research/family/bg1741.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/research/family/bg1741.cfm) (accessed March 1, 2011).

<sup>30</sup> American Institute for American Family Values, "The Marriage Movement: A State of Principles," <http://americanvalues.org/catalog/pdfs/marriagemovement.pdf> (accessed February 1, 2011).

being of children.”<sup>31</sup> Through PRWOA, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) was instituted to reduce burgeoning welfare rolls by setting time limits on aid and promoting self-sufficiency through work and marriage. In fact, three of PRWOA’s four objectives allocated a portion of TANF monies to states for marriage incentives, marriage promotion, and relationship education.<sup>32</sup> Initially, these objectives were not fully realized because transitioning people off welfare into jobs where training programs were available was prioritized. In contrast, before the HMI was implemented, there were no organized programs to encourage healthy marriages.

HMI supporters relied on research such as McLanahan and Sandefur’s pro-marriage arguments favoring the developmental benefits that nuclear families contribute to the long-term well being of children. Horn, championed the HMI as an extension of the government’s social programs for vulnerable children and families. He implemented many programs under his tenure: abstinence-only education for teenagers, responsible fatherhood programs, and a mentoring program for children of incarcerated men and women. His conservative ideology fueled his belief in the patriarchal institution of heterosexual marriage as important and necessary for child well being. As the former director for the National Fatherhood Initiative, his familiarity with emerging research on the correlation between child well being and marriage, along with the influence, and financial support from pro-marriage lobbyist, think tanks, and religious organizations were evident in his testimony before the United States Senate Committee on Finance to support President Bush’s proposed healthy marriage initiative.

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<sup>31</sup> Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1986, Public Law 104-193, 104<sup>th</sup> Cong. (August 22, 1996), 101.

<sup>32</sup> Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1986, Public Law 104-193, 104<sup>th</sup> Cong. (August 22, 1996), 101.

The research literature is now replete with studies showing that children raised in stable, healthy marriages are less at risk for a host of negative developmental outcomes compared to children raised in unstable, unhealthy and dysfunctional married households. We know, for example, that children raised in healthy married households are less likely to be poor, less likely to fail at school, and less likely to have an emotional or behavioral problem requiring psychiatric treatment, compared to those who are not. Moreover, as adolescents, they are less likely to commit crime, develop substance abuse problems or to commit suicide. Healthy marriages, it appears, are the best environment for rearing healthy children.<sup>33</sup>

Horn concluded that adults in healthy marriages are happier, healthier and richer than singles or those in unhealthy marriages. He also argued that communities with lower incidence of social pathology have higher marriage rates.

Bush rationalized the HMI because he believes that the nuclear family has the greatest economic resources to ensure the child well being. Before securing funding for the HMI, he made these remarks to justify TANF reauthorization:

Across America, no doubt about it, single mothers do heroic work. They have the toughest job in our country. Raising children by themselves is an incredibly hard job. In many cases, their lives, and their children's lives would be better if their fathers had lived up to their responsibilities. Statistics tell us that children from two parent families are less likely to end up in poverty, drop out of school, become addicted to drugs, have a child out of wedlock, suffer abuse or become a violent criminal and end up in prison. Building and preserving families are not always possible; I recognize that. But, they should always be our goal. So, my administration will give unprecedented support to strengthening marriages.<sup>34</sup>

Bush's goal of "building and preserving families" is organized around the rhetoric of family values. This is another example of familism or designating the nuclear family as ideal.

The concept of *family values* assumes that nuclear families are the only possible form of care-giving relationships for children while denying preexisting relational

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<sup>33</sup> Administration for Children and Families, "Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Programs," <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/programs/healthy-marriage> (accessed February 1, 2011).

<sup>34</sup> George W. Bush, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, George W. Bush, 2002, Bk. 1, January 1 to June 30, 2002* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 2005), 291.

configurations that are responsible for the care and nurture of children; for example: same-gender-loving couples; single men and women who adopt children; women who opt for artificial insemination or surrogacy; men and women whose children have been born in the context of intimate relational encounters and share parenting duties; and for single African American mothers, the women who rely on extended families for material and emotional support. To support these alternative family and relational configurations, theologian Mary Hunt argues that "certain assumptions have been made about the moral normativity of coupled, heterosexual relationships that move toward marriage [and] these norms function to downgrade or leave aside entirely the vast, rich experiences"<sup>35</sup> of other types of relationships that are the "true human relational norm."<sup>36</sup>

According to law professor Twila Perry, adding *values* to family discussions suggests only married nuclear families can model proper moral and ethical behavior for children. She argues that family values had racist and sexist undertones when evoked during welfare discourses. It is racist because the presence of single African American mothers represents a "failure of values and morality."<sup>37</sup> This means African Americans are not capable of forming nuclear families. Family values are sexist because they privileges male-headed families. Perry explains,

Racism is implicated in a number of ways in the family values debate. Although the phrase "family values" is often used to decry an alleged loss of values in society generally, the phrase also has a lurking racial subtext. The term "family values," linked as it often is with welfare and single motherhood, easily becomes a code word for race just as "welfare dependency," "inner city," and "the urban underclass," have. There is an implication that black families, especially those headed by single mothers, do not share the values of the rest of society and do not

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<sup>35</sup> Mary E. Hunt, *Fierce tenderness: a feminist theology of friendship* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 9.

<sup>36</sup> Hunt, *Fierce tenderness*, 9.

<sup>37</sup> Twila L. Perry, "Family Values, Race, Feminism and Public Policy," *Santa Clara Law Review* 36, no. 2 (1996): 352.

pass on to their children the kinds of values that most Americans believe are important.<sup>38</sup>

Further, the HMI believes requiring self-sufficiency and promoting marriage can remedy this moral failure. The model of American citizenship then is the middle-class; married, heterosexual family who subscribes to the Protestant work ethic, which says you will meet your needs if you work hard.<sup>39</sup>

### Single African American Mothers and Welfare Reform

The collective rallying cry for a return to *family values* influenced the overhaul of AFDC. Essentially and though not explicitly stated, AFDC was restructured because of government concerns about excessive welfare dependency—primarily of single African American mothers. In the first empirical research on the largest statewide marriage initiative in Oklahoma, *One Marriage under God the Campaign to Promote Marriage in America*, sociologist Melanie Heath explains that welfare reform targeted single African American mothers.<sup>40</sup> A portion of her study focused on the centralization of race in welfare-reform discourses. She noted when more African American women accessed welfare benefits, the government focused on out-of-wedlock child-bearing and improper heterosexual behavior of African Americans to exclude them from aid, cut benefits, or abolish welfare altogether.<sup>41</sup>

This negative focus on single African American mothers is reminiscent of Daniel Patrick Moynihan labeling the African American family a self-perpetuating tangle of

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<sup>38</sup> Perry, "Family Values, Race, Feminism and Public Policy," 352.

<sup>39</sup> Melanie Heath, *One marriage under God: the campaign to promote marriage in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 4.

<sup>40</sup> Heath, *One marriage under God*, 77.

<sup>41</sup> Heath, *One marriage under God*, 87.

pathology in *The Negro family: the case for national action*.<sup>42</sup> In another section, Moynihan concluded that the matriarchal structure of African American families weakened the role of African American men, and that the problems in African American communities were related to the “deterioration of the Negro family.”<sup>43</sup> Hymowitz suggests that Moynihan borrowed his pathological theory from psychologist Kenneth Clark. In the *Dark Ghetto*, Clark calls himself an “involved observer” of the 1960s ghetto or inner city neighborhoods or “a world of broken homes.”<sup>44</sup> Clark argued that the pervasive illegitimacy in those neighborhoods creates,

chronic, self-perpetuating pathology... Not only is the pathology of the ghetto self-perpetuating, but also one kind of pathology breeds another. The children born in the ghetto are more likely to come into a world of broken homes and illegitimacy; and this family and social instability is conducive to delinquency, drug addiction, and criminal violence.<sup>45</sup>

Sociologists Angela Hattery and Earl Smith explain that Clark’s ghetto pathology reference comes from the belief that African American families are inherently deficient because of the savage and uncivilized manner that Africans were living before being bought to America.<sup>46</sup>

In describing African American families as matriarchal, Moynihan borrowed sociologist E. Franklin Frazier’s use of the word in his study of newly emancipated African-American families, *The Negro Family in the United States*. Frazier used *matriarchate*---families led by females, to describe the detrimental effects of this structure on African American family life. He said slavery, urbanization, and racial

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<sup>42</sup> Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro family: the case for national action*. (Washington: Office of Policy Planning and Research United States Department of Labor, 1965), 29.

<sup>43</sup> Moynihan, *The Negro family*, 30.

<sup>44</sup> Kenneth Bancroft Clark, *Dark ghetto: dilemmas of social power*, 2nd ed. (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 132.

<sup>45</sup> Clark, *Dark ghetto*, 81.

<sup>46</sup> Angela Hattery and Earl Smith, *African American families* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007), 23.

oppression forced African Americans into disorganized female-headed structure.<sup>47</sup>

Frazier was not the first to write disparagingly of African American female-headed households; W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* was the first empirical study on the post-antebellum African American family. Among his numerous findings, Du Bois explained that Philadelphia area female-headed households were responsible for the community's problems:

The result of this large number of homes without husbands is to increase the burden of charity and benevolence, and also on account of their poor home life to increase crime...The great weakness of the Negro family is still lack of respect for the marriage bond, inconsiderate entrance into it, and bad household economy and family government.<sup>48</sup>

Moynihan's theses were likely grounded in Frazier and Clark's studies, and though the fullness of his report was more descriptive than prescriptive, he wanted to encourage politicians to offer more support to African American families. Despite the *Moynihan Report's* intentions, sociologist William Ryan criticized Moynihan for "blaming the victim," a concept he later developed in *Blaming the Victim*, his response to the Moynihan. In this work, Ryan focuses on the absurdity of Moynihan's supposedly deviant Negro family as the "fundamental weakness of the Negro community with stereotyped connotations of matriarchy, fatherlessness, and pervasive illegitimacy."<sup>49</sup> In other words, he argues that in *blaming the victim*, poor people are responsible for their own problems.

The negative focus on single African American mothers continued when Ronald Reagan called welfare-dependent single African American mothers, "Welfare Queens" in

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<sup>47</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro family in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), 146.

<sup>48</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: a social study* (1899; repr., New York: Schocken, 1967), 68, 72.

<sup>49</sup> Ryan, *Blaming the Victim*, 5.

a *New York Times* article written on February 15, 1976. During his 1976 presidential campaign, he grossly exaggerated and generalized the activities of a Chicago area African American woman who defrauded several government programs. Unfortunately, the national attention focused on her led all welfare-dependent African American women to be caricatured as lazy, promiscuous welfare cheats. Other politicians chimed in when Vice-President Daniel Quayle blamed the 1992 Los Angeles riots on single African American mothers. He said the riots were "directly related to the breakdown of family structure, personal responsibility and social order in too many areas of our society."<sup>50</sup>

In sociologist Ruth Sidel's research on single mothers, *Unsung Heroines: Single Mothers and the American Dream*, she describes Republican and Democrat views of single mothers during congressional welfare reform discussions.

Perhaps the most denigrating and dehumanizing attacks on single mothers occurred in 1995 on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives when, as part of an effort to reduce the money spent on social welfare programs, two members of Congress compared welfare recipients to animals. This campaign was fueled by conservative Republicans, spearheaded by Newt Gingrich and buttressed by the work of the social scientist Charles Murray, who labeled out-of-wedlock births "the single most important problem of our time" as he railed against the "culture of illegitimacy." Bill Clinton seemed to support the negative view of welfare recipients when he made his now famous promise in 1991, during the presidential campaign, to "put an end to welfare as we know it."<sup>51</sup>

President Clinton successfully ended AFDC in 1996.

#### The African American Healthy Marriage Initiative

Diane Dawson, an administrator with the Administration for Children and Families when the HMI was developed, supported Horn's "marriage cure"<sup>52</sup> philosophy

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<sup>50</sup> Douglas Jehl, "Quayle Deplores Eroding Values; Cites TV Show," *Los Angeles Times*, March 20, 1992, Accessed March 1, 2011, [http://articles.latimes.com/1992-05-20/news/mn-241\\_1\\_dan-quayle](http://articles.latimes.com/1992-05-20/news/mn-241_1_dan-quayle)

<sup>51</sup> Ruth Sidel, *Unsung heroines: single mothers and the American dream* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 2.

<sup>52</sup> Kathrine Boo, "The Marriage Cure: Is Wedlock Really a Way Out of Poverty?," *New Yorker*,



for strengthening families. She subsequently organized the AAHMI as a component of HMI. The AAHMI is a targeted strategy to “promote and strengthen the institution of healthy marriage in the African American community ... toward increasing child well-being and strengthening families by promoting healthy marriages.”<sup>53</sup> The AAHMI promoted the federal government’s healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood agenda in African American communities through conferences, forums, roundtables, and grants.

Some AAHMI leaders saw the AAHMI as an opportunity to right the wrongs of federal government policies that split up families in slavery and allegedly forced fathers out of the home so that women could receive welfare benefits. Historian Elizabeth Pleck provides vivid examples of couples who fought for the right to cohabitate in *Not Just Roommates: Cohabitation after the Sexual Revolution*. In her research, she points out that welfare-fraud investigators often targeted single African American mothers by parking outside their homes and taking notes of who entered. She highlights a 1963 raid in Oakland, California called *Operation Bed Check*, where inspectors entered hundreds of homes at midnight to determine whether a man was inside.<sup>54</sup> In *Crisis in the Village: Restoring Hope in African American Communities*, ethicist Robert Franklin writes about his support for the HMI/AAHMI. He argues that the HMI should support vulnerable African American families especially because of historical laws and policies that damaged some African American families.

One could examine the history of race law that impinged upon the black population which had a cumulative negative impact on black families, from the lynching laws that removed men from families and had a chilling effect upon men who stood up for the families, the history of welfare policies that functionally

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August 18, 2003.

<sup>53</sup> Administration for Children and Families, “African American Healthy Marriage Initiative.”

<sup>54</sup> Elizabeth Hafkin Pleck, *Not just roommates: cohabitation after the sexual revolution* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 52.

drove men out of the lives of women and children. Perhaps legislators can now lend their authority and resources to strengthening fragile families.<sup>55</sup>

These two examples demonstrate the irony of the government's new concern for African-American families.

African American faith communities played a leading role in promoting healthy marriages. Some African-American religious leaders believe that the philosophy of the HMI can help strengthen African American families. In a 2005 interview with *Religion and Ethics News Weekly*, the Reverend Darrell Armstrong, an African American pastor of Shiloh Baptist Church in Trenton, New Jersey, explained why he supports the HMI/AAHMI:

I would agree with many of my evangelical brothers and sisters, many of my conservative Christian brothers and sisters who would say that when there is an absence of family model, structure of mother and father, and single parenting notwithstanding — I pastor a black church in urban America. I see the black women who are raising their children by themselves. I see the grandmothers who are raising their grandchildren by themselves. But that does not negate that if it took two to make that child, it should take two to raise that child. The absence of a nuclear family model — I think that is the genesis of a lot of the issues that are going on. If young black boys don't see a positive black male role model, they will seek it somewhere else. I see a lot of that going on in our communities.<sup>56</sup>

In 2003, The Annie E. Casey Foundation invited theologian Robert Franklin then professor of social ethics at Emory University, to initiate research on marriage promotion in African American Christian congregations.<sup>57</sup> Two consultation sessions with African

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<sup>55</sup> Robert M. Franklin, *Crisis in the village: restoring hope in African American communities* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 78.

<sup>56</sup> Lucky Severson, "Rev. Darrell Armstrong Extended Interview," Faith and Family in America, Part Three: African-American Families, Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2005/11/11/november-11-2005-rev-darrell-armstrong-extended-interview/11528/> (accessed March 23, 2012).

<sup>57</sup> Annie E. Casey Foundation, "Mission and History," <http://www.aecf.org/Home/AboutUs/MissionAndHistory.aspx> (accessed March 1, 2011). The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization, dedicated to helping build better futures for disadvantaged children in the United States. The primary mission of the Foundation is to foster public policies, human-service reforms, and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today's

American clergy as well as relationship, marriage and family advocates from across the country were born out of Franklin's research described in, *Healthy Marriages in Low-Income African American Communities*.<sup>58</sup> *Crisis in the Village* summarized the findings from both gatherings. However, I highlight portions of those discussions as it pertains to relationship education in African American churches with single African American mothers.

During both gatherings, the participants evaluated existing relationship education and marriage enrichment ministries along with the best strategies for strengthening African American families in their churches.<sup>59</sup> They concluded that if relationship education workshops were offered *en masse* to the sixty-five thousand African American congregations in the United States, they could improve the relationships of countless African American children and families. However, they raised several concerns about the curriculums lack of cultural content and the need for African Americans to inform marriage promotion, education strategies (especially through focus groups, field tests and advisory groups), and curriculum development. They were also concerned that single African American mothers could be penalized when marriage promotion as a poverty alleviation strategy because the disproportionate ratio of eligible African American women to men means many African American women will never marry.<sup>60</sup>

In the initial funding period of the AAHMI, despite concerns about single African American mothers, and agreeing with the marriage promotion goals of the HMI, seventeen African American churches and community organizations were awarded

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vulnerable children and families.

<sup>58</sup> Robert Michael Franklin, "Healthy marriages in low-income African-American communities," *Journal of Family Ministry* 19, no. 3 (2005).

<sup>59</sup> Franklin, "Healthy marriages," 35.

<sup>60</sup> Franklin, "Healthy marriages," 35.

multiyear grants focusing solely on marriage. For example, Friendship West Baptist Church, a large African American congregation in Dallas, Texas, received \$546,025 per year from 2006 to 2011 in African American-targeted funds for a media campaign, marriage education, and a teen program. A ministers' network also received \$550,000 annually to support teaching *Keys to a Healthy Marriage* in twenty-five cities to African American youth.<sup>61</sup>

### Relationship Education Curricula and Single African American Mothers

The American relationship education movement has a sixty-year history. Formerly known as the marriage education movement, it formed to supplant family and communal responsibility for transmitting values and socializing youth to institutions. Historian Beth L. Bailey explains that the founders of marriage education dedicated themselves to improving American courtship and marriage by providing college students with practical education, based on scientific research, to change their behavior with the hopes that they would live happier, more wholesome lives.<sup>62</sup> Bailey notes that sociologist Ernest Burgess is the most prominent member of the United States relationship education movement. She describes the movement as being centered on college campuses because Burgess argued for using social science research to “school youth in the most functional and successful forms of courtship and family life.”<sup>63</sup>

David and Vera Mace, Bernard and Louise Guerney, Virginia Satir, Lori Gordon, and Scott Stanley and Howard Markman are pioneers of the modern relationship

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<sup>61</sup> Jean V. Hardisty, "Pushed to the Altar: The Right-Wing Roots of Marriage Promotion," *The Public Eye Magazine*, Political Research Associates, <http://www.publiceye.org/pushedtothealtar/> (accessed March 24, 2011).

<sup>62</sup> Beth L. Bailey, "Scientific Truth ... and Love: The Marriage Education Movement in the United States," *Journal of Social History* 20, no. 4 (June 1, 1987): 711.

<sup>63</sup> Bailey, "Scientific Truth ... and Love," 712.

education movement in the United States. The Maces' and Guerneys' believed marital therapy methods were ineffective because they did not prevent divorce and out-of-wedlock children so they created marriage-education materials to reduce this trend. The Maces' contributed thirty-three books on marriage and family counseling including the curriculum, *How to Have a Happy Marriage: A Step-By-Step Guide to an Enriched Relationship*.<sup>64</sup> The Guerneys are best known for developing a brief ten-skill psychoeducational curriculum called relationship enhancement therapy (RE). RE teaches attitudes and skills that enable participants to relate to significant others in ways that maximize satisfaction of emotional and functional needs through four sets of skills or behaviors: expression, empathy, mutuality, and support.<sup>65</sup> The goal of RE is to empower couples to solve their own relationship challenges using a brief ten-skill psycho-educational curriculum. It is now a significant model for relationship education curriculums for low-income couples, parents, stepfamilies, and individuals.<sup>66</sup>

Virginia Satir, a prominent leader in the marriage and family therapy movement, encouraged marriage and family therapist to be relationship educators. She influenced the development of the *Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills* (PAIRS) curriculum. The PAIRS foundation mission is to "teach those attitudes, emotional understandings, and behaviors that nurture and sustain healthy relationships and to make

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<sup>64</sup> David R. Mace and Vera Mace, *How to have a happy marriage: a step-by-step guide to an enriched relationship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977).

<sup>65</sup> Bernard G. Guerney Jr., *Relationship enhancement: skill-training programs for therapy, problem prevention, and enrichment* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1977), 25. Relationship enhancement therapy consists of ten skills: empathetic, expressive, discussion/negotiation, problem/conflict resolution, facilitation, conflict management, self-change, helping-others change, generalization, and maintenance.

<sup>66</sup> Mary Ortwein, "IDEALS for Professionals: Introduction," <http://www.skillswork.org/introduction/> (accessed March 23, 2014). Mary Ortwein is a marriage and family therapist and founder of IDEALS an organization that offers relationship workshops incorporating the principles of RE into the following curriculums: Mastering the Mysteries of Love, Love's Cradle, Ready for Love, Mastering the Mysteries of Stepfamilies, Mastering the Mysteries of Sacramental Love, the Happy Hometown Marriage Education Kit, and Mastering the Magic of Play.

this knowledge broadly available on behalf of a safer, saner, more loving world.”<sup>67</sup>

PAIRS was developed by social worker Lori Gordon. The curriculum is a compilation of her academic, clinical, and personal experience with marriage, divorce, and a single mother of four children.<sup>68</sup> Scott Stanley, Howard Markman and colleagues at the University of Denver developed the *Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program* (PREP) curriculum for couples and the *Within Our Reach* curriculum for individuals. Both curriculums focus on prevention of marital distress and skills for healthy marriages.<sup>69</sup> Like RE, PREP created niche curriculums for military couples, singles, Christian couples, African American couples, fathers, workplace relationships, and prison inmates.<sup>70</sup>

Research has shown that relationship education can help couples improve their communication and problem-solving skills. For example, Blanchard et al. analyzed over 100 published and unpublished studies from 1975 and they concluded that relationship education had a significant positive effect on a couple’s communication skills and relationship quality.<sup>71</sup> Unfortunately, a recent study by Hawkins and Ooms found that 117 relationship education programs created since 1975 have primarily served white married and middle-class couples and almost all relationship programs in the United

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<sup>67</sup> PAIRS Foundation, "Mission and History," <http://instructor.pairs.com/history.html> (accessed December 1, 2012).

<sup>68</sup> Lori H. Gordon, "The Saga of the Development of PAIRS," in *Building intimate relationships: bridging treatment, education, and enrichment through the PAIRS program*, ed. Rita DeMaria, Mo Therese Hannah, and Lori Heyman Gordon (New York: Brunner-Routledge, 2003), 20-21.

<sup>69</sup> Mari Jo Renick, Susan L. Blumberg, and Howard J. Markman, "The Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP): An Empirically Based Preventive Intervention Program for Couples," *Family Relations* 41, no. 2 (April 1992).

<sup>70</sup> PREP, "The PREP Curriculums," <https://www.prepinc.com/Content/TEACHING-MATERIALS/CURRICULA.htm> (accessed March 23, 2014).

<sup>71</sup> Victoria L. Blanchard et al., "Investigating the effects of marriage and relationship education on couples' communication skills: A meta-analytic study," *Journal of family psychology* 23, no. 2 (2009): 203.

States are for couples in existing marriages or relationships.<sup>72</sup> In fact, the curriculums sanctioned by the HMI and used by AAHMI grant recipients are designed for white middle-class committed couples who follow a Western traditional mate selection pattern of dating, engagement, marriage and children.<sup>73</sup> With the advent of targeted initiatives like the AAHMI and the Hispanic Healthy Marriage Initiative, existing curriculums have been revised with culturally applicable information. Thus, this need for culturally appropriate curriculums was important for the Annie E. Casey discussions.

Single African American mothers are not barred from participating in relationship education workshops because there are curriculums for singles. However, the government-sanctioned curriculums focus on pre-marital education, when many single African American mothers have been abandoned; left abusive relationships; have no viable relationship prospects that lead to marriage; or choose not to marry. Moreover, the nuclear-family model that these curriculums espouse does not provide for the strengthening of single African American mothers in light of cultural and relational trauma. For example, the *Marriage Education Curriculum Assessment Guide* helps organizations choose a suitable curriculum for their audience (youth, single adults, couples, African American, Asian, Hispanic ... etc.) and it helps providers develop their own curriculums.<sup>74</sup>

According to the assessment guidelines, there are a range of topics to choose from, however, the chosen curriculum must include the required content and optionally

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<sup>72</sup> Alan J. Hawkins and Theodora Ooms, "What Works in Marriage and Relationship Education? A Review of Lessons Learned with a Focus on Low-Income Couples," National Healthy Marriage Resource Center, <http://www.healthymarriageinfo.org/resource-detail/index.aspx?rid=2861> (accessed March 1, 2012).

<sup>73</sup> Theodora Ooms and Pamela Wilson, "The Challenge of Offering Relationship and Marriage Education to Low-Income Populations," *Family Relations* 53, no. 5 (Apr 3, 2004).

<sup>74</sup> Administration for Children and Families Archives, "ACF Curriculum Assessment Guide," [http://archive.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/pdf/acf2009\\_curriculum\\_assessment\\_guide.pdf](http://archive.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/pdf/acf2009_curriculum_assessment_guide.pdf).

advised content. Other topics can be included to enhance or contextualize the required or optionally advised content. The six minimum required content areas are: commitment to a current or future healthy marriage; communication; conflict resolution; cultural and religious beliefs about marriage and family; benefits of marriage for adults, children, community, and society; and qualities of healthy relationships and healthy marriages. Most important, the curriculum selected “should clearly offer participants who have already chosen to marry or who are interested in learning about marriage, the opportunity to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to form and sustain a healthy marriage.”<sup>75</sup>

The AAHMI award recipients primarily used three relationship education curriculums: PREP, PAIRS, *African American Family Life and Education Program* (AAFLEP), Program for Strong African American Marriages (ProSAMM); and *Within My Reach* for singles.<sup>76</sup> ProSAMM and AAFLEP are for African American couples and parents.<sup>77</sup> However, like the aforementioned curricula, they perpetuate the panacea of marriage for strengthening African American families and improving the well being of children. This leads me to the problem that I address in the dissertation. The curricula skills-based focus on marriage does not provide sufficient attention to the ways in which single African American mothers are suffering from cultural and relational trauma.

I will say more about cultural trauma in chapter four and relationship trauma in chapter five. Briefly, cultural trauma is the cumulative emotional response to the micro aggressions of racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, familism, and controlling images.

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<sup>75</sup> Administration for Children and Families Archives, "ACF Curriculum Assessment Guide."

<sup>76</sup> The PREP curricula descriptions are taken from: <https://www.prepinc.com>.

<sup>77</sup> Tera R. Hurt et al., "Engaging African American Men in Empirically Based Marriage Enrichment Programs: Lessons From Two Focus Groups on the ProSAAM Project," *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* (June 11, 2012); Lorraine C. Blackman, "African American Family Life Education Institute," <http://www.aafle.org/aafle/index.php/AAFLE/aafle-curricula.html> (accessed March 1, 2012).



Controlling images are culturally-constructed *stories* about groups and individuals that communicate how that group or individual is to be regarded by others.<sup>78</sup> Collins argues that controlling images make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life.<sup>79</sup> In her edited volume on single African American mothers, sociologist Bette Dickerson argues that controlling images renders single African American mothers as “victims of others attitudes, paradigms, and concepts, resulting in a state of dislocation, or social and psychological marginality.”<sup>80</sup> Four images examined by Collins are relevant for this study: *mammy*, *matriarch*, *Jezebel*, and *welfare queen*. I will define these images, and a fifth image, the *strong black woman*, more fully in chapter four.

In the dissertation, I define relational trauma as experiences of interpersonal violence and abandonment, as well as losses related to unrealized hopes, dreams, and expectations idealized in relationships. I argue that an impediment to healing relational trauma for single African American mothers is disenfranchised grief. Kenneth Doka, professor of gerontology and author of many articles on grief, develops the theory of disenfranchised as grief incurred from losses that cannot be openly acknowledged, publically mourned, or socially supported based on grieving norms that determine who has the right to grieve and what they can grieve.<sup>81</sup> Charles Corr, author of several books on grief, death, and dying and a contributor to Kenneth Doka’s edited volume on

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<sup>78</sup> M. Maureen Walker, "How Relationships Heal," in *How Connections Heal: Stories From Relational-Cultural Therapy*, ed. M. Maureen Walker and Wendy B. Rosen (New York: Guilford Press, 2004), 17.

<sup>79</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black feminist thought: knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 72.

<sup>80</sup> Bette Dickerson, *African American single mothers: understanding their lives and families* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995), 1.

<sup>81</sup> Kenneth J. Doka, *Disenfranchised grief: new directions, challenges, and strategies for practice* (Champaign, IL: Research Press, 2002), 5.

disenfranchised grief, notes that failing to disclose or communicate to others what one is experiencing in grief does not mean that such grief is disenfranchised because disenfranchisement exceeds mere unawareness to suggest a more or less active process of disavowal, renunciation, and rejection.<sup>82</sup> He explains that disenfranchisement is the opposite of enfranchisement.

In bereavement grief, enfranchisement applies in particular to those who are recognized by society as individuals who have experienced a significant loss, who have a right to experience and express their reactions to that loss, and who can expect to have their losses and their subsequent reactions and responses to those losses acknowledged and supported by society. These are individuals who are free to present themselves as persons who have encountered loss and who may express their grief, mourn publicly, and receive support from others—at least within the society's accepted limit. Bereavement and grief that are disenfranchised go beyond the boundaries of what is regarded as socially acceptable. These people are denied the legitimacy and freedom of expression of what is regarded as socially acceptable.<sup>83</sup>

This is especially important for single African American mothers grieving losses incurred in relationships not sanctioned by the church.

I contend the daily challenges of being the sole caregiver to children, along with persisting stress of cultural trauma, and the unhealed wounds of relational trauma force African American mothers to suppress their grief and overcompensate for the missing parent by heavily relying on strength and independence to prove that they and their children are not the images projected on them by society. These behavioral strategies cause unnecessary pain and suffering because the losses at the root of their pain and suffering is not only unacknowledged but disenfranchised, and when loss is unacknowledged and enfranchised, it leads to delayed and complicated grief responses.

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<sup>82</sup> Charles A. Corr, "Revisiting the Concept of Disenfranchised Grief," in *Disenfranchised grief: new directions, challenges, and strategies for practice*, ed. Kenneth J. Doka (Champaign, IL: Research Press, 2002), 40.

<sup>83</sup> Corr, "Revisiting the Concept of Disenfranchised Grief," 40.

This dissertation humanizes single African American mothers because we are rarely seen as individuals; thus, this dissertation allowed the representative sample chosen for this study to tell their own story. For pastoral care and counseling to respond to the needs of single African American mothers, I examine the ways that the research participants cope with the challenges of parenting as single mothers, especially as it is compounded with experiences of cultural trauma and relational trauma.

### Thesis

This dissertation argues that a relationship education curriculum with attention to healing from cultural and relational trauma can be a resource for pastoral care and counseling in African American churches to help strengthen single African American mothers. If strengthening families for the well being of children is predicated on improving the relational functioning of parents, then relationship education should also help parents despite marital status or intent to marry. Relational theorists attest to the importance of relational functioning for well being and I argue that the well being of some single African American mothers is compromised by cultural and relational trauma. I also contend that the underlying social problems permeating African American communities are related to cultural and relational trauma because many leaders in the African American community do not talk about unhealthy interpersonal interactions. Instead, many African American leaders and churches have historically focused on social justice issues at the expense of cultivating interpersonal relationships.

Relational psychologist Pamela Regan notes, “Relationships people form with lovers, mates, family members, and friends appear to play a particularly important role in

promoting or hindering health, happiness, and other important life outcomes.”<sup>84</sup> I find that relational cultural theory (RCT) adequately describes Regan’s importance of relationships as a continuum of growth throughout the lifespan. RCT also posits that this growth can be stymied by previous unhealthy relationships, cultural power arrangements, and cultural controlling images. Cultural controlling images come from Collins’ theory of controlling images. In RCT, cultural controlling images are one way cultures construct power and justify particular patterns of relationship.<sup>85</sup> I will say more about RCT and single African American mothers in chapters five and six, but it is important to note that the well being espoused by these theories is not contingent upon relationship configurations.

I mentioned Robert Franklin’s work with the HMI/AAHMI through the Annie E. Casey foundation and his description of that work in *Crisis in the Village*. His discussion on relationships in *Crisis in the Village* is important for my argument because it partially focuses on the crises of interpersonal relationships in urban African American communities and the effect of these relationships on African American children. Specifically, Franklin situates these crises in families, churches, and schools. These three “anchor institutions,”<sup>86</sup> or networks of support and vehicles for social change between individuals and government institutions, have historically been sources of African American survival.<sup>87</sup> He points out that to some extent, African Americans control these institutions and the presence of crises in them suggests that we bear some responsibility for the multilayered and intersecting crises within them.

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<sup>84</sup> Pamela C. Regan, *Close relationships* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 10.

<sup>85</sup> Walker, "How Relationships Heal," 17.

<sup>86</sup> Franklin, *Crisis in the village*, 4.

<sup>87</sup> Franklin, *Crisis in the village*, 11.

Franklin concludes that these institutions need to be transformed by having healthier adults because when healthy adults lead families, churches, and schools, our children lives will be significantly better.<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, describing the various crises that exist in African American communities and their connection to the three anchor institutions, Franklin contends that transforming our communities is contingent upon African American leaders' ability and willingness to name the pain and suffering that underlies these crises. This transformation entails empowering African American people to make the necessary changes in their lives for healthier relationships, Franklin argues, "Someone must name our pain and guide us through the common pains and the occasional deeper traumas of human existence."<sup>89</sup>

In some respects, I find that Franklin's explication of African American relationships and his support of relationship education coincide with my argument for using relationship education to support single African American mothers. Though he too tends to sway towards the nuclear family ideal, he also believes that African American children can and do thrive in other family forms.

Black children like all children, thrive best when their married biological parents rear them. But when that is not possible, they can do well in other family forms as long as they are loved, supported financially, and given the safest, most nurturing environment possible. There is abundant research now available that reminds us of the importance of healthy relationships between fathers, mothers, and their children. Of course, when the ideal is not available, the village and the public can and should support the healthy development of children as if these were investments essential to the health and security of the nation.<sup>90</sup>

Franklin defines healthy relationships as interpersonal bonds and interactions

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<sup>88</sup> Franklin, *Crisis in the village*, 12.

<sup>89</sup> Franklin, *Crisis in the village*, 10.

<sup>90</sup> Franklin, *Crisis in the village*, 44.

characterized by mutuality, trust, respect, nonviolence, and sharing.<sup>91</sup> I add authenticity and vulnerability. His argument lists ten reasons the village needs to focus on healthy relationships: the significance of relationships; the importance of dating; the nuclear-family ideal as the norm for children; when the nuclear-family ideal is not available, healthy alternatives can help children thrive; public policy that supports the thriving of African American families; the need for ethical conduct in relationships; the importance of fathers in the lives of children; the role of faith leaders in fostering the well being of children; collaborating with other organizations to more effectively support families; and the destructive nature of interpersonal violence.

All these areas are important because the anchor institutions must *do* something to promote health, healing, and wholeness in African American people. This is especially true for single African American mothers! I also wholeheartedly agree with Franklin's contention that our struggle to protect and extend voting rights, expand job opportunities, alleviate poverty, improve public health, and create safer streets, must now include doing the "unglamorous work of improving the quality of relationships, all relationships in our communities. Doing so will ensure that we produce healthier and better children, healthier and better parents, and healthier and better adults ..."<sup>92</sup>

I argue that "unglamorous work" is directly related to the lingering pain and suffering or as he stated, "the common pains and the occasional deeper traumas of human existence."<sup>93</sup> This has taken a toll on African American individuals and families. African American clinical social worker Elaine Pinderhughes connects this pain and suffering to the psychological trauma, loss, and unresolved grief of enslaved African Americans. She

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<sup>91</sup> Franklin, *Crisis in the village*, 53.

<sup>92</sup> Franklin, *Crisis in the village*, 53.

<sup>93</sup> Franklin, *Crisis in the village*, 10.

posits that the trauma and loss that enslaved African Americans endured was not healed and has subsequently been passed down through the generations. Pinderhughes explains:

The evidence of this trauma-plagued existence is reflected in many social indicators of the quality of current African American life: the high rate of poverty, marital disruption, single-parent families, incarceration, drug and alcohol abuse, homelessness, poor school achievement and dropout, children in foster care, and disparities in health morbidity and mortality. These realities are the endpoint of centuries of accumulated loss, traumatization, and the transmission of racial stress.<sup>94</sup>

Part of this “unglamorous work” is acknowledging that many African Americans do not have relationship skills and without appropriate ways of being in relationship coupled with cultural and relational trauma, the pain of inferiority, and violation without safe spaces to lament and heal, makes it impossible for people to feel secure in relationships. And if we are insecure, we take it out on others: ourselves, our intimate partners, and even our children.

I am not arguing that churches should not encourage and support marriage and nuclear families; however, single mothers, single fathers, and single grandmothers are the new norm in African American communities and in black churches. Moreover, I argue that single African American mothers are an underserved population in many black churches. A relationship education curriculum can help clergy, lay counselors, or trained group facilitators comprehend the complex, multi-layered, and intersecting cultural and relational experiences and concerns single African American mothers have, including examining how their theological beliefs may contribute to their pain and suffering.

Most single African American mothers and their children, who receive help, do so outside marriage. Therefore, I argue that an appropriate relationship education curriculum

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<sup>94</sup> Elaine Pinderhughes, “The Multigenerational Transmission of Loss and Trauma: The African American Experience,” in *Living Beyond Loss: Death in the Family*, ed. Monica McGoldrick and Froma Walsh (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 162.

for single African American mothers needs to focus more broadly on all interpersonal relationships. Augmenting relationship education in these ways promises to increase the well being of many single African American mothers and their children. Single African-American mothers are, after all, parents, and increased attention to their well being is likely to enhance the well being of their children and give reason to hope that the relational contexts will be improved for children in future generations.

I envision this type of pastoral care and counseling happening in what Howard Clinebell calls growth groups. I will say more about this pastoral care and counseling model in chapter seven. Here, it suffices to say that growth groups provide an interpersonal environment in which persons can become more “*aware, relating authentic, loving, enjoying, spontaneous, creating, risking, present, coping, and connected with God*.” It is in this process of fulfilling one's potential for full aliveness that one experiences inner affirmation and joy.<sup>95</sup>

In the next section, I define important terms appearing throughout the dissertation.

### Definition of Terms

In order to ensure clarity of the dissertations' content, the following key terms are defined:

#### African American

Some sources cited in this study use the term Black, instead of African American. This language is maintained when quoting those sources, but I draw a distinction between “African American” and “Black.” African Americans are people who have grown up in the United States whose ancestry includes enslaved Africans. Blacks are all persons and

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<sup>95</sup> Howard John Clinebell, *The people dynamic: changing self and society through growth groups* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 6-7.



communities across the diaspora with African ancestry

## Grief

### *Grief*

I use the definition of grief provided by Mitchell and Anderson:

Grief is the normal but bewildering cluster of ordinary human emotions arising in response to a significant loss, intensified and complicated by the relationship to the person of the object lost. Guilt, shame, loneliness, anxiety, anger, terror, bewilderment, emptiness, profound sadness, despair, helplessness: are all part of grief and all are common to being human, grief is the clustering of some are all of them emotions in response to loss.<sup>96</sup>

### *Disenfranchised Grief*

Disenfranchised grief is grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported.<sup>97</sup>

Disenfranchised grief is predicated on “grieving norms” that regulate social and interpersonal perceptions about who can and cannot grieve and what they can and cannot grieve.

## Interpersonal Violence

Interpersonal violence is behavior within an intimate relationship that often results in lifelong physical and emotional consequences for those involved, but intimate violence can also affect one’s interpersonal, social, and spiritual functioning. It usually includes a pattern of behavior, attitudes, and beliefs in which an intimate partner attempts to maintain coercive power and control. It produces fear, and trauma in those being victimized. Examples of interpersonal violence are child abuse, incest, and spousal battery.

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<sup>96</sup> Kenneth R. Mitchell and Herbert Anderson, *All our losses, all our griefs: resources for pastoral care* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 54.

<sup>97</sup> Kenneth J. Doka, *Disenfranchised grief: recognizing hidden sorrow* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989), 4.

## Pastoral Care and Pastoral Counseling

The definition of pastoral care used in this study is partly based on the Clebsch and Jaekle's definition: "pastoral care consists of helping acts, done by *representative Christian persons*, directed toward the *healing, sustaining, guiding, and reconciling of troubled persons whose troubles arise in the context of ultimate meanings and concerns*."<sup>98</sup> The emphasis on "representative persons" means that pastoral care is not the sole function of clergy. I agree with Edward Wimberly "pastoral care is a communal concept. It exists whenever persons minister to one another in the name of God."<sup>99</sup> Moreover, for the pastoral care and counseling approach that I propose in this study with single African American mothers in black churches and in the African American context, I agree with Carroll Watkins-Ali that the additional functions of *nurturing, empowering, and liberating* are essential.<sup>100</sup>

In this dissertation, I am proposing an integrative approach that also uses the tools of pastoral counseling. Pastoral counseling is "the utilization of a variety of healing (therapeutic) methods to help people handle their problems and crises more growthfully and thus experience healing of their brokenness."<sup>101</sup> Therefore the seven functions of pastoral care and Howard Clinebell's holistic-growth liberation model of pastoral care guides this study: "Pastoral care and counseling involve the utilization by persons in ministry of one-to-one or small group relationships to enable healing empowerment and

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<sup>98</sup> William A. Clebsch and Charles R. Jaekle, *Pastoral care in historical perspective: an essay with exhibits* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964), 4.

<sup>99</sup> Edward P. Wimberly, *Pastoral care in the Black church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 17.

<sup>100</sup> Carroll A. Watkins-Ali, *Survival & liberation: pastoral theology in African American context* (St Louis: Chalice Press, 1999), 129.

<sup>101</sup> Howard John Clinebell, *Basic types of pastoral care & counseling: resources for the ministry of healing and growth*, rev. and enl. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1984), 26.

growth to take place within individuals and their relationships.”<sup>102</sup>

### Relationship Education

The HMI refers to marriage education and relationship education, using the two terms interchangeably to refer to curricula designed to impart information and attitudes in individuals and couples to teach the skills and behaviors needed to maintain successful intimate relationships.<sup>103</sup> Relationship education is focused on interpersonal skill building, relationship safety, self-knowledge, and setting the stage for healthy marriage. In this study, relationship education refers more broadly to teaching knowledge, skills and behaviors across all relationships.

### Single African American Mothers

In this study single African American are women who have the primary physical custody and financial responsibility of their children because of divorce, death of a parent, choice, or abandonment by their children’s fathers.

### Trauma

Trauma is an inescapably or extremely stressful event involving direct experience, witnessing, or learning about an event that overwhelms people’s existing coping mechanisms.<sup>104</sup> Carol Gilligan’s definition of trauma is also helpful:

Trauma is the shock to the psyche that leads to dissociation: our ability to separate ourselves from parts of ourselves, to create a split within ourselves so that we can know and also not know what we know, feel, and yet not feel our feelings. It is our ability, as Freud put it in *Studies on Hysteria* to hold parts of our experience not as a secret from others but as a “foreign body” within ourselves.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Clinebell, *Basic types of pastoral care & counseling*, 26.

<sup>103</sup> Theodora Ooms, "The New Kid on the Block: What is Marriage Education and Does it Work?," *Center for Law and Social Policy* 7 (July 28, 2005): 2.

<sup>104</sup> Bessel A. Van der Kolk, "Trauma and Memory," in *Traumatic stress: the effects of overwhelming experience on mind, body, and society*, ed. Bessel A. Van der Kolk and Lars Weisaeth (New York: Guilford Press, 2006), 279.

<sup>105</sup> Carol Gilligan, *The birth of pleasure* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 6.

In the dissertation, I discuss two specific types of trauma: cultural and relational. I slightly distinguish my definition of cultural trauma from the theory of cultural trauma developed by sociologist Jeffery Alexander. Alexander contends that cultural trauma “occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.”<sup>106</sup> Sociologist Ron Eyerman, applying Alexander’s theory to African American identity formation, argues, “The *trauma* in question is slavery, not as institution or even experience, but as collective memory, a form of remembrance that grounded the identity formation of a people.”<sup>107</sup> I situate my definition of cultural trauma in experience as the persistent emotional violence inflicted on single African American mothers through controlling images and tri-partite oppression (racism, sexism, and heterosexism). This experience connects the social aspects of Alexander’s notion of cultural trauma to the consciousness and identity of single African American mothers.

Relational trauma incorporates the characteristics and effects of interpersonal violence, and I integrate the emotional and spiritual effects from the various losses that single African American mothers incur such as the loss of hopes and dreams in failed relationships, trust, idealized expectations of support from the fathers of their children, abandonment, and betrayal.

### Well Being

The dissertations’ definition of well being is based on Howard Clinebell’s and Dolores Williams definitions of well being. Clinebell writes:

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<sup>106</sup> Jeffrey C. Alexander, *Trauma: a social theory* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2012), 6.

<sup>107</sup> Ron Eyerman, *Cultural trauma: slavery and the formation of African American identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1.

You are whole or have well being to the degree that the center of your life is integrated and energized by love and healthy spirituality. This wholeness at the center of your life influences and is influenced by the well being of all the dimensions of your life and relationships. Your well being intertwines in widening circles with the well being of the important people in your life and the well being of your community, culture, and world. Wholeness or well being is not the absence of brokenness. Instead, it is what you choose, at the center of your life, to do with your brokenness.<sup>108</sup>

Clinebell describes the seven dimensions of well being or wholeness: spiritual, psychological, physical, relational, vocational, recreational, and ecological. This study focuses on the spiritual, psychological, and relational dimensions of well being.

Williams defines well being as a “peaceful, balanced, upright, spiritual existence.”<sup>109</sup>

### Scope and Limitations

The dissertation focuses on the experiences of Christian single African American mothers and on the African American churches’ care for this constituency. I chose a Christian focus because I am Christian and Christianity is important to many single African American mothers (and African Americans generally). However, the insights gleaned from this dissertation may help other cultures and religions.

Single African American mothers are diverse in age, education, socioeconomic status, and circumstance, but this study includes single African American mothers over twenty-five years of age, with at least a high-school education, and hold primary physical and financial responsibility for their children. Limiting the study’s thesis allows for deep engagement and reflection with a specific and often overlooked segment of single African American mothers instead of the stereotypical low-income or welfare-dependent single African American mother that is overrepresented in most research on single

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<sup>108</sup> Howard John Clinebell, *Well being: a personal plan for exploring and enriching the seven dimensions of life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 3-4.

<sup>109</sup> Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the wilderness: the challenge of womanist God-talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 218.

African American mothers.

This study is multidisciplinary in nature and, given the topic, necessarily addresses public policy on marriage and welfare reform. However, I limit my research on public policy to the development of relationship education curricula as a useful resource for pastoral care and counseling with single African American mothers. I do not engage the marriage argument per se, only inasmuch as it is about the federal government and churches' argument that marriage is necessary for healthy children.

### Importance and Contribution

A large body of research is published on single African American mothers in the fields of sociology and psychology. However, most do not address the effect of cultural and relational trauma on single African American mother's well being. There is also a dearth of research on single African American mothers in the fields of practical theology, pastoral care, and counseling, pastoral psychology, and theology. The importance of this dissertation is threefold: first, it provides a valuable resource to practical theology and pastoral care and counseling on the importance of providing pastoral care to single African American mothers; second, it introduces relationship education as an important resource for pastoral care and counseling by illuminating the importance of healthy relationships and learning relational skills that can improve the well being of individuals, children, and families; finally, the dissertation fills a scholarly void because it will offer a womanist practical theological perspective on single African American mothers. I explain womanist approaches to practical theology in the next section and in chapter two.

A womanist practical theological analysis of single African American mothers is important and necessary. It is important to offer a more balanced approach to the mostly

male-authored sociological research that has, on one hand, negatively portrayed and devalued single African mothers and, on the other hand, romanticized their strengths. It is necessary to offer a balanced perspective that does not solely glamorize the women as strong, resilient, and adaptive as is true of revisionist research. A critical examination of single African American mothers illuminating their pain and suffering is more realistic for a model of pastoral care and counseling that attends to their well being and the well being of their children.

### Relevant Literature

This section reviews relevant literature on single African American mothers in pastoral care and counseling, pastoral theology, and practical theology. After an exhaustive review of the literature, I located one dissertation, *Young Black Single Mothers and the Parenting Problematic: The Church as Model of Family and as Educator*, on young single Christian African mothers written by Eileen Ledford.<sup>110</sup> Ledford employs a qualitative research methodology along with a womanist/feminist hermeneutic to suggest the content of a religious education curriculum to improve the parenting skills of young single African American mothers. Alice Walker coined the term *womanist* in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*.<sup>111</sup>

Womanist. 1. From womanish. (Opp. of "girlish," i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, "You acting womanish," i.e., like a woman...Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture ... and women's strength ... Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female ... traditionally universalist ... Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Eileen M. Ledford, "Young black single mothers and the parenting problematic: the church as model of family and as educator" (Ph.D. diss., Fordham University, 2010).

<sup>111</sup> Alice Walker, *In search of our mothers' gardens: womanist prose*. A Harvest book (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

<sup>112</sup> Walker, *In search of our mothers' gardens*, xi-xii.

Womanist theologian Dolores Williams explains the term's appropriation for religious thought:

Many women in church and society have appropriated it as a way of affirming themselves as black while simultaneously owning their connection with feminism and with the Afro-American community, male, and female. The concept of womanist allows women to claim their roots in black history, religion, and culture.<sup>113</sup>

My work is similar to Ledford's study in that I examine the lives of single African American mothers to offer a pastoral care and counseling resource utilizing relationship education in African American churches. However, my study departs from Ledford because I use a more diverse sample of single African American mothers and my curriculum focuses on strengthening and healing. The strength of Ledford's study, in a similar vein to mine, is the hope that a structured skills-based curriculum can improve the quality of life for single African American mothers, and in focusing on relationship skills, the well being of their children.

Given the dearth of literature on single African American mothers in pastoral care, pastoral counseling, pastoral theology, and practical theology, I include relevant literature on single African American mothers in sociology and psychology. Thus, this review is divided into four sections. The first section will review relevant literature on single African American mothers in sociology and psychology. The remaining three sections will focus on literature that relates more broadly to African American women in practical theology, pastoral theology, pastoral care, and pastoral counseling: myths and stereotypes; interpersonal violence; and womanist models of pastoral care and

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<sup>113</sup> Delores S. Williams, "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Voices," *Christianity and Crisis* 47, no. 3 (March 1987): 66.



counseling.

### Psychosocial Research on Single African American Mothers

Most of the literature on single African American mothers in sociology and psychology focuses on the well being of poor and young single African American mothers and their children. Though, several books do not limit themselves to poor single African American mothers to counter negative portrayals by Moynihan and others. Sociologist Bette Dickerson's edited volume, *African American Single Mothers: Understanding Their Lives and Families*, is the most comprehensive publication. Dickerson writes from an Afrocentric-feminist perspective and many articles in this volume contradict deficit models of African American family life. They are written asserting that "false perceptions in assessing African American single mothers and their families has led to inaccurate questions and insubstantial explanations that serve to support the *deficit model*."<sup>114</sup> Ten essays in *African American Single Mothers* focus on the effect of the intersecting complexities and social and psychological issues on single African American mothers. The authors highlight their strengths and resiliency, despite racism, classism, and sexism. They also discuss the importance of family and extended family for helping single African American mothers cope with the demands of single parenting. Similar to most of the research on single African American mothers, *African American Single Mothers* is mostly concerned with poor mothers.

The experiences of single African American mothers are also the focus of sociologist Barbara Omolade's *It's a Family Affair: The Real Lives of Black Single Mothers* and in *Unbroken Circle: A Historical and Contemporary Study of Black Single Mothers and Their Families*. In *It's a Family Affair*, Omolade describes her experience as

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<sup>114</sup> Dickerson, *African American single mothers*, 2.

a single African American mother as a counter to distorted images of single African American mothers.<sup>115</sup> Omolade, like Dickerson, juxtaposes deficit models of single African American mothers with actual reality. For instance, she contradicts the myth that single African American mothers are intentionally welfare dependent with evidence of only a small segment completely relying on welfare. Granted, she is writing before the reorganization of AFDC into TANF, but her data dispels the *welfare queen* myth because many single African American mothers are the working poor.<sup>116</sup> Omolade also argues that slavery continues to impact the relationships of African American men and women.

Long after the chains have been removed, slavery continues in a new form inside the minds and hearts of black people. Far too many Black women have become the “slaves of slaves” and their slave masters are Black men. Physical and mental abuse is a major reason Black women leave their husbands and mates...Mental anguish and depression hurt our relationships.<sup>117</sup>

Omolade’s study coincides with Dickerson’s contention that family and friends are significant resources for helping single African American mothers raise their children.<sup>118</sup> While Omolade’s research also tends to focus on poor mothers, she finds *The Sisterhood of Black Single Mothers* (TSNSM) model of self-help and self-definition helpful for this group and working-class single African American mothers.<sup>119</sup> A goal of *The Sisterhood* is to empower African American single mothers to name her own reality while rejecting negative labels.

*Unbroken Circle*’s informs my work because it provides a helpful historical examination of single African American mothers from slavery through desegregation In

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<sup>115</sup> Barbara Omolade, *It's a family affair: the real lives of black single mothers* (Latham, NY: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1986).

<sup>116</sup> Omolade, *It's a family affair*, 4.

<sup>117</sup> Omolade, *It's a family affair*, 7.

<sup>118</sup> Omolade, *It's a family affair*, 8.

<sup>119</sup> Daphne Busby founded the Sisterhood of Black Single Mothers in 1978. The social-justice organization provided emotional, economic, and social support to young single African American mothers in New York City.

*Unbroken Circle*, Omolade expands sociologist Orlando Patterson's concept of *social death*. Patterson argues that the treatment slaves received, coupled with their being relegated by whites to a non-human status, resulted in a symbolic death.<sup>120</sup> Omolade offers a black feminist perspective to expand the concept of social death, suggesting that while African American women suffered under the yoke of oppression during and after slavery, they consciously resisted their oppressive conditions—or social death. “Resistance to social death took the form of creating viable families, whether patriarchal or female-headed, and of developing extended kinship networks along with political and protest strategies.”<sup>121</sup>

Aurora Jackson, a professor of social welfare, conducted longitudinal research on single African American mothers working low-wage jobs. At least twenty-six articles assessed the effect of family and community support, maternal stress, parenting skills and economic resources on the well being of single African American mothers and their children. In *Well-Being Among Single, Black, Employed Mothers*, Jackson concluded, from a sample of 111 single African American mothers, that depression affected their well being.<sup>122</sup> Two articles, *The Effects of Role Strain on Single, Working, Black Mothers' Perceptions of Their Young Children*<sup>123</sup> and *Psychological Distress among Single, Employed, Black Mothers and Their Perceptions of Their Young Children*,<sup>124</sup> concluded the education received by single African American mothers appeared to be a mitigating factor against psychological stress and positive views of their children. Jackson's empirical research describes the challenges endured by single African American mothers and it substantiates the dissertations' concerns about their well being. African American family theorist Harriet Pipes-McAdoo is a revisionist scholar who wrote affirmative research about African American families. Some of her work focused on single African American mothers. Two in particular, *Strategies Used by Black Single Mothers Against Stress*<sup>125</sup> and *Stress Levels, Family Help Patterns, and Religiosity in Middle-and-Working-Class African American single mothers*,<sup>126</sup> describe various strategies, and

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<sup>120</sup> Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

<sup>121</sup> Barbara Omolade, "Unbroken Circle: A Historical and Contemporary Study of Black Single Mothers and Their Families," *Wisconsin Women's Law Journal* 3 (1987): 240.

<sup>122</sup> Aurora P. Jackson, "Well-Being among Single, Black, Employed Mothers," *Social Service Review* 66, no. 3 (September 1992).

<sup>123</sup> Aurora P. Jackson, "The effects of role strain on single, working, Black mothers' perceptions of their young children," *Social Work Research* 18, no. 1 (1994).

<sup>124</sup> Aurora P. Jackson, "Psychological distress among single, employed, Black mothers and their perceptions of their young children," *Journal of Social Service Research* 19, no. 3-4 (1994).

<sup>125</sup> Harriette Pipes McAdoo, "Strategies used by black single mothers against stress," *The Review of Black Political Economy* 14, no. 2-3 (December 1985).

<sup>126</sup> Harriette Pipes McAdoo, "Stress Levels, Family Help Patterns, and Religiosity in Middle- and Working-Class African American Single Mothers," *Journal of Black Psychology* 21, no. 4 (November

resources used single African American mothers use to combat role strain and other stressors of single parenting. McAdoo's empirical research is informative for this study in the same way that Jackson's research describes the real life challenges and their effect on the well being of single African American mothers and their children.

### African American Women in Pastoral Care and Counseling

A key focus of this dissertation is the effect of controlling images on the well being of single African American mothers. It is especially concerned with the *strong black woman* image. Several journal articles and books chapters written by African American pastoral theologians examine controlling images and oppression of African American women. Four studies address them specifically: practical theologians Chanequa Walker-Barnes and Beverly Wallace wrote articles critiquing the *strong black woman* image; and practical theologian Teresa Snorton's two articles critique the *angry black woman* and *matriarch* images. In *A Womanist Legacy of Trauma, Grief, and Loss: Reframing the Notion of the Strong Black Woman*,<sup>127</sup> Beverly Wallace examines the *strong black woman* in the context of trauma, grief, and loss. In *The Burden of the Strong Black Woman*, Walker-Barnes, examines the *strong black woman* image as a "theological problem that implicates male and female Christians of all races in moral evil."<sup>128</sup>

Wallace and Walker-Barnes examine the psychological, social, and spiritual harm that occurs when the images are imposed on African American women as a societal norm and when African American women internalize the images as a form of protection or measure of pride. The characteristics they attribute to women who embody the *strong black woman* are strength; self-reliance; caregiving at the expense of her own self-care;

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<sup>127</sup> Beverly R. Wallace, "A womanist legacy of trauma, grief, and loss: reframing the notion of the strong black woman icon," in *Women Out of order: risking change and creating care in a multicultural world*, ed. Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner and Teresa Snorton (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).

<sup>128</sup> Chanequa Walker-Barnes, "The burden of the strong black woman," *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 19 (Summer 2009): 2.

and she controls her actions and her emotions all while functioning as if all is fine.

Wallace contends that some *strong black women* say they are “fine,” when they are actually emotionally numb. She states that becoming emotionally numb is the typical way many African American women survive pain and psychological insults that would normally be responded to more assertively.<sup>129</sup>

Walker-Barnes and Wallace explain that the legacy of the *strong black woman* originated in slavery because slave women were expected to work the fields, care for their children and their slave owner’s children in the midst of violence and loss, without acknowledging any emotional or physical pain. This behavior developed into a form of resistance whereby strength is valorized and tends to go unquestioned by African American women and the African American community. Walker-Barnes calls for a new vision of black womanhood entailing three things that can be used for pastoral care and counseling with single African mothers. First, African American women need an embodied non-essentialized identity based on their lived experience.<sup>130</sup> This means that African American women can be empowered to embody various aspects of their identity instead of embodying “concrete visualizations of how black women *ought to be*.”<sup>131</sup> The second suggestion counters *strong black women* who over indulge in self-care as a healthier way of being in the world. Walker-Barnes argues that this form of self-care,

is an excessive individualism that belies the interdependency of humanity and betrays the Christian call to servanthood. Thus, a new vision for African American womanhood must inculcate a commitment to self-care and also help women to develop and maintain mutually supportive relationships with family, community, and society.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> Wallace, “A womanist legacy of trauma, grief, and loss,” 48.

<sup>130</sup> Walker-Barnes, “The burden of the strong black woman,” 16.

<sup>131</sup> Walker-Barnes, “The burden of the strong black woman,” 16.

<sup>132</sup> Walker-Barnes, “The burden of the strong black woman,” 16-17.

The third vision of a new African American womanhood is an identity that “that frees them from the burden of immortality, one which deports them from the land of mythology and repatriates them to the realm of humanity.”<sup>133</sup>

Wallace’s article is particularly helpful for this study because she focuses on how African American women, who embody the *strong black woman*, respond to trauma, grief and loss. She contends that African American do not express their emotions because they are influenced by the cultural and societal ideal that it is important for African American women to remain strong.”<sup>134</sup> Wallace posits that the icon of the strong black woman has been passed down through generations, and she theorizes that African American mothers taught their daughters that by being independent and confident they could endure racism and sexism.

Teresa Snorton, a Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) supervisor, conceived her pastoral care approach to help other supervisors work with African American students who present as angry in CPE groups. In examining the *angry black woman* and *matriarch* images, Snorton, like Wallace and Walker-Barnes, contends this anger is a symptom of post-traumatic stress from pent up emotions transmitted intergenerationally by enslaved African American women. Snorton posits that it is also a by-product of tenuous mother-daughter relationships, self-destructive behaviors, and unhealthy male-female relationships.<sup>135</sup> Snorton notes that the subtle cultural messages inherent in expressions of anger for African American women is that no one will like you and you are unlovable. In the context of religion, she points out that some African American women have adhered

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<sup>133</sup> Walker-Barnes, "The burden of the strong black woman," 17.

<sup>134</sup> Wallace, "A womanist legacy of trauma, grief, and loss," 44.

<sup>135</sup> Teresa E. Snorton, "What About All Those Angry Black Women?," in *Women out of order: risking change and creating care in a multicultural world*, ed. Jeanne Stevenson Moessner and Teresa E. Snorton (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).

to biblical scriptures noting that anger is one of the seven deadly sins and should be quickly resolved.<sup>136</sup>

Snorton argues that these messages can force African American women to suppress or eliminate legitimate expressions of anger. African American women “live with the reality of being stereotyped and misrepresented. When it comes to anger, the strong message of how to “be” or “not to be” are clear. To be accepted by her American culture, the African American woman must deny her anger or risk alienation.”<sup>137</sup> She contends that pastoral caregivers must be aware of the roots of anger, allow for the expression of anger, name the anger, and walk them through their angry feelings as a means of empowerment and a vehicle for growth.<sup>138</sup> Snorton’s article on the controlling image of the *matriarch* describes an image often ascribed to single African American mothers.<sup>139</sup> Snorton argues that these controlling images should be recognized as issues in womanist methods of pastoral care. “A necessary question for the pastoral care provider is to what extent is my care to this particular African-American woman influenced by *controlling images*?”<sup>140</sup>

### Interpersonal Violence

Understanding interpersonal violence is particularly relevant for a pastoral care and counseling approach with African American women who consider the black church

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<sup>136</sup> Biblical references to anger as a sin are found in Matthew 5:22 (NRSV): But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire; and Galatians 5:19-21 (NRSV): The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

<sup>137</sup> Snorton, “What About All Those Angry Black Women?,” 211.

<sup>138</sup> Snorton, “What About All Those Angry Black Women?,” 217.

<sup>139</sup> Teresa E. Snorton, “The legacy of the African-American matriarch: new perspectives for pastoral care,” in *Through the eyes of women: insights for pastoral care*, ed. Jeanne Stevenson Moessner of *The legacy of the African-American matriarch* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

<sup>140</sup> Snorton, “What About All Those Angry Black Women?,” 217.

to be a safe communal space to connect with others and worship God. However, experiences of interpersonal violence are often silenced by sexism and patriarchal theologies embedded in the sermons preached from African American pulpits. For example, practical theologians Phillis Sheppard and Stephanie Crumpton argue that sexist hermeneutics counter black theologies of liberation because sermons that ignore biblical narratives about abuse replicate the lived “psychic and emotional violence of intimate violence.”<sup>141</sup> Subsequently, many African American women suffer because they are unable to acknowledge and express any pain and anger related to their abuse. Sheppard notes that clergy hinder rather than help abused African American women when they ignore bible scriptures about interpersonal violence.

For the most part, clergy have hindered rather than helped women be free from their abusive partners. Our apathy, denial, exhortation, ignorance, and misrepresentation of the Bible have added to women’s pain and suffering and placed them at even greater danger. The time is long overdue for us to stop turning our backs on domestic violence and begin speaking out against this sin.<sup>142</sup>

I agree with Crumpton that black churches should critically engage the Bible to ensure its sermons are liberating and not oppressive. I also find Sheppard’s womanist practical theological response to interpersonal violence in the lives of African American women and children a helpful proscription for African American faith communities:

Address the religious community regarding silence concerning the abuse of woman and children; address the convergence of violence, oppressive power and sexualized violence in the Bible; become a place where the experiences of women are welcome without censure, without shame, without blame, and without the compulsion to forget; support the need for communities of faith to become advocated to end violence against women and children and other vulnerable

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<sup>141</sup> Stephanie M. Crumpton, "No safe space: the impact of sexist hermeneutics on black women survivors of intimate abuse: a womanist pastoral care perspective," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 32, no. 1-2 (Fall-Spr 2004-2005): 99.

<sup>142</sup> Phillis Isabella Sheppard, "No Rose Colored Glasses: Womanist Practical Theology and Response to Sexual Violence," in *Spirit and Truth: Essay on Theology, Spirituality and Embodiment in Honor of C. John Weborg*, ed. Phillip J. Anderson and Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom (Chicago: Covenant Press, 2006), 244.



members of society, and articulate and clear understanding to psychological, spiritual, and social impact of sexual violence in the lives of African Americans.<sup>143</sup>

Moreover, I recognize that interpersonal violence is experienced by some single African American mothers thus adding to the multiple ways in which their pain and suffering is ignored by sermons affirming the patriarchal family as the norm or that single African American mothers, who had sex outside of marriage, are sinners. This kind of preaching exacerbates the shame that some single African American mothers may already feel.

Practical theologian Carolyn McCrary's article on African American women, intimate violence, and internalized shame explains how shame operates in single African American mothers.<sup>144</sup> McCrary argues that shame functions as layers of "psychic poison" manifesting itself in an abuse survivor's self-image and she contends that shame can result in self-blame for the abuse.<sup>145</sup> She examines the embodiment of shame in African American women, who she calls "victim survivors"<sup>146</sup> of interpersonal violence, using three aspects of W.R.D Fairbairn's psychodynamic theory: espousal of dependency as a positive quality for relationships; the internalizing the bad object and the consequent splitting of the central ego; and the internalization of social structures and ideologies.<sup>147</sup> She notes that womanist pastoral care and counseling can help African American women because it creates a safe, sacred, and nurturing environment that is sensitive to the internal and the external systems that oppress and/or uplift and inhibit or augment the

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<sup>143</sup> Sheppard, "No Rose Colored Glasses," 254.

<sup>144</sup> Carolyn McCrary, "Intimate violence against Black women and internalized shame: a Womanist pastoral counseling perspective," *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 28, no. 1-2 (Fall-Spr 2000-2001).

<sup>145</sup> McCrary, "Intimate violence against Black women and internalized shame," 17.

<sup>146</sup> The term victim-survivor comes from: Traci C. West, *Wounds of the spirit: black women, violence, and resistance ethics* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 5.

<sup>147</sup> McCrary, "Intimate violence against Black women and internalized shame," 18.

healthy development of their psychic identities.<sup>148</sup> Whereas McCrary is concerned with the multiple layers of oppression that effect sexual abuse survivors, this study is concerned with the multi-layers of oppression that effect single African American mothers' overall well being.

### Womanist Models of Pastoral Care and Counseling

This study engages the intersection of womanist theology and psychology in ways similar to practical theologians Phillis Sheppard, Elizabeth Walker, and McCrary's work, as a pastoral care and counseling model to help African American women use psychological and spiritual resources to heal from damaging internalized negative images. The greatest difference between their work and this study is their reliance on the theories of white male psychoanalysts Heinz Kohut and W.R.D. Fairbairn. Instead, this study uses relational cultural theory, a theory that intentionally places primacy on women's relationships and culture as both the source of, and a means of healing, psychological pain.

Similar to the work of Marsha Foster Boyd and Linda Hollies, who were the catalysts behind the construction of WomanistCare<sup>149</sup> as pastoral care and counseling practices with African American women excluded from feminist pastoral theology, this study values five components of WomanistCare: communication, listening, validation, affirmation, and healing for pastoral care with single African American mothers.<sup>150</sup>

Marsha Wiggins and Carmen Braun Williams are womanist pastoral psychologist

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<sup>148</sup> McCrary, "Intimate violence against Black women and internalized shame," 33.

<sup>149</sup> Linda H. Hollies, *Womanistcare: how to tend the souls of women* (Joliet, IL: WTWMI Publications, 1992).

<sup>150</sup> Marsha Foster-Boyd, "Womanistcare: some reflections on pastoral care and the transformation of African-American women," in *Embracing the spirit: womanist perspectives on hope, salvation, and transformation*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 200-01.

who wrote two articles on womanist approaches to pastoral care and pastoral counseling with African American women. In *Pastoral Care with African American Women: Womanist Perspectives and Strategies*, Wiggins and Williams suggest pastoral care interventions in the context of societal and internalized oppression. The underlying goal for their pastoral care and counseling approach requires “that caregivers acknowledge their possible positions of power and privilege.”<sup>151</sup> The five strategies to fulfill this goal are: caregivers must take seriously their own social location; acknowledge and confront how they, their colleagues, family and friends embody the various isms (racism, sexism, heterosexism, etc...); take responsibility for learning about African American culture; expand their worldviews; commit to continued growth on combating issues of racism, sexism, and oppression; and demand a high-level of empathy and commitment to personal and social change for all providers of pastoral care to African American women.<sup>152</sup> In *Constructing New Realities: Integrating Womanist Traditions in Pastoral Counseling with African-American Women*, Wiggins and Williams contend that womanist cultural and spiritual themes of “moral agency with race and gender aspects of spirituality”<sup>153</sup> are “rich resources for pastoral counseling with African American women.”<sup>154</sup> They also find that African American women’s historical experiences for self-determination, communalism, and social activism offer useful tools for emotional

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<sup>151</sup> Marsha I. Wiggins and Carmen Braun Williams, "Pastoral care with African-American women: womanist perspectives and strategies," in *Injustice and the care of souls: taking oppression seriously in pastoral care*, ed. Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook and Karen B. Montagno (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 45.

<sup>152</sup> Wiggins and Williams, "Pastoral care with African-American women," 56.

<sup>153</sup> Marsha I. Wiggins and Carmen Braun Williams, "Constructing New Realities: Integrating Womanist Traditions in Pastoral Counseling with African-American Women," *Pastoral Psychology* 47, no. 4 (March 1999): 304.

<sup>154</sup> Wiggins and Williams, "Constructing New Realities," 303.

healing and growth.”<sup>155</sup>

### Organization of Chapters

This introductory chapter provided an overview of the study, the research problem, my thesis, essential definitions, the scope and limitation, importance and contribution, and a review of the literature most closely related to this project. I conclude chapter one with an outline of the chapters.

Chapter Two presents the dissertation’s hermeneutical and empirical methods. I provide my rationale for the dissertation’s practical theological approach. Next, I describe my primary methodology using Richard Osmer’s four-task method and my rationale for using a womanist practical theology as my secondary method. This discussion is followed by an outline of my womanist practical theology approach including relevant theories and conversation partners. This is followed by a discussion of the empirical method employed in the dissertation; the process for selecting the research participants; and my data collection and data analysis procedures. The dissertation uses a qualitative research method: interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). The findings for this study will focus on the significant themes that emerged from the IPA process. Where possible, I narrate stories in the participants’ voices. This chapter includes a statement about the data validity and reliability and, as is necessary with qualitative research, I use a self-reflexive process to describe my research perspective and make clear my own biases when doing research with African American women.

Chapter Three provides profiles of my ten research participants, followed by a summary and detailed description of six superordinate themes that emerged during my

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<sup>155</sup> Wiggins and Williams, "Constructing New Realities," 304.

analysis of the participants' transcripts: challenges; feeling judged and stigmatized; coping with the challenges and stereotypes; trauma, loss, and abandonment; self-evaluation; and experience of God, religion, and church.

Chapter Four provides a psychosocial and historical analysis of cultural trauma. I support my theory of cultural trauma by arguing that one of the ways that single African American mothers resist dehumanizing controlling images is by embodying the controlling image of the *strong black woman*. Despite its functional role, I conclude that embodying the *strong black woman* is a form of oppression and disenfranchisement sanctioned by society and the African American church to obscure pain and suffering from experiences of relational trauma.

Chapter Five provides a psychosocial and historical analysis of relational trauma. I discuss two components of relational trauma common among single African American mothers: interpersonal violence and ambiguous and disenfranchised loss. I then discuss disenfranchised grief as the response to relational trauma. I conclude this chapter by discussing the African American church and relational trauma.

Chapter Six provides a theological reflection of John 4, Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well as a womanist practical theology of connection for attending to the well being of single African American mothers. Then, I use it to enfranchise loss and grief, and provide norms for embodying healthy self-images and mother images. I conclude this chapter with ethical and spiritual norms for a family theology inclusive of single African American mothers.

Chapter Seven describes revisions and additions to existing relationship education curriculums for pastoral care and counseling with single African American mothers in

black churches.

Chapter Eight summarizes the main points of each chapter and offers recommendations for further research.

### Summary

This introductory chapter provided an overview of the dissertation including an examination and statement of the research problem and thesis. I also included essential definitions, the scope and limitation of the study, structure of the argument, and organization of the chapters. In the next chapter, I describe the hermeneutical and empirical research methodologies that frame this study.

Chapter 2  
2. Description of Hermeneutical and Research Methodology  
Practical Theology and Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis  
Introduction

In *Practical Theology for Black Churches*, practical theologian Dale Andrews defines practical theology as an engaging process between theology, theory, and practice, with each one feeding back upon the others.<sup>156</sup> For Andrews practical theology has an oxymoronic character, which he describes as a chasm reflecting the tension of applying theology to ordinary lives of faith.<sup>157</sup> According to Andrews, the task of practical theology bridges this chasm. Based on my experience in churches and other pastoral settings, I know this is not always easy because it means that practical theologians must delve into messy and complex situations in individual lives and faith communities—situations intersecting with systems and institutions in need of change and transformation.

Practical theologians must engage these intersecting layers when providing pastoral care and counseling for marginalized communities.<sup>158</sup> In this chapter, I outline the practical theological chosen for this dissertation. It has three sections. In section one, I provide the rationale for the practical theological method. Although it is beyond the scope of this dissertation to provide a substantive historical overview of practical theology, I highlight aspects that are important for my practical theological analysis of single African

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<sup>156</sup> Dale P. Andrews, *Practical theology for black churches: bridging black theology and African American folk religion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 1.

<sup>157</sup> Andrews, *Practical theology for black churches*, 1.

<sup>158</sup> Kimberle Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 141. Intersectionality explains how race, gender, and class interact at the political and social levels in African American women's lives. It has been developed to offer a broader perspective on the way that multiple systems of oppressions effect marginalized and minority groups of people. I use womanist theology as an intersectional method to analyze similar intersecting oppressions in the lives of single African American mothers.

American mothers and their experiences of cultural and relational trauma.

### Rationale for Practical Theological Method

Practical theology is a multifaceted discipline. Although most practical theologians believe there is no monolithic definition of practical theology, Bonnie Miller-McLemore summarizes commonly shared understandings:

A term used in Christian theology for a general way of doing theology concerned with the embodiment of religious beliefs in the day to day lives of individuals and communities. Its subject matter is often described through generic words that suggest movement in time and spaces, such as *action, practice, praxis, experience, situation, events, and performance*. Its subject is also associated with action-oriented religious words, such as formation, transformation, discipleship, witness, ministry, and public mission. In its focus on concrete instances of religious life, its objective is both to understand and to influence religious wisdom or faith in action. Ultimately practical theology is normatively and eschatologically oriented. That is, it not only describes how people live as people of faith in communities and society, but it also considers how they might do so more fully both in and beyond this life and world.<sup>159</sup>

Practical theology then is used in at least four different ways: an activity of believers, a curricular area, an approach to theology, and as an academic discipline.<sup>160</sup>

To help researchers and religious practitioners comprehend human experience in diverse contexts, practical theology is carried out through various methods. Methods are underlying theories or philosophies of an approach being considered. There are many uses of the word method; however, I am relying on Emmanuel Lartey's understanding of method as a framework for choices and decisions concerning appropriate procedures to arrive at desired ends.<sup>161</sup> Practical theology entails three intersecting movements or tasks of reflection on current practice or particular situations involving understanding,

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<sup>159</sup> Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "Practical Theology," in *Encyclopedia of Religion in America*, ed. Charles H. Lippy and Peter W. Williams, vol. 3 (Washington: Congressional Quarterly Press, 2010), 1739-40.

<sup>160</sup> Miller-McLemore, "Practical Theology," 1741.

<sup>161</sup> Emmanuel Lartey, *In living color: An intercultural approach to pastoral care and counseling*, 2nd ed. (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2003), 75.



explanation, and transformation.<sup>162</sup> The first task typically begins with a “thick description.” This is a multilayered way of defining the social, cultural, or religious context of practices, situations, or habits.<sup>163</sup> The next task uncovers theological assumptions implicit in the multidisciplinary analysis of practice or situations.<sup>164</sup> The final task offers recommendations for improving or transforming current practices. The three movements, illustrated as hermeneutical, empirical, and strategic perspectives in a hermeneutical circle, work together to interpret human action in light of the Christian tradition; analyze human action with regard to faculty and potentiality; and aid in the development of action models and action strategies for the various domains of action.<sup>165</sup>

Most practical theologians use some version of these tasks; however, their point of departure is preference for an empirical or hermeneutical approach. Empirical approaches evaluate church practices and categorize, analyze, interpret, and evaluate religious convictions, ideas, images, and feelings of people using qualitative and quantitative research methods in conversation with the social sciences. Experience is the entry point followed by the deductive approach: developing theological concepts, making them operational, and testing them empirically. It can therefore contribute to the development of explanatory concepts and theories within the whole of theology.<sup>166</sup> Hermeneutics examine the basic principles of understanding and formulates rules for interpreting people, situations, and experiences.

Many practical theological approaches contain elements of both hermeneutic and

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<sup>162</sup> Gerben Heitink, *Practical theology: history, theory, action domains: manual for practical theology*, trans. Reinder Bruinsma (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1999).

<sup>163</sup> Pamela D. Couture, *Blessed are the poor?: women's poverty, family policy, and practical theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 23.

<sup>164</sup> Richard R. Osmer, *Practical theology: an introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008), 4.

<sup>165</sup> Heitink, *Practical theology*, 242.

<sup>166</sup> Heitink, *Practical theology*, 174.

empirical methods; particularly the empirical practical theological method of Johannes Van der Ven. Speaking about Van der Ven's stance, Mary Elizabeth Moore argues that

Practical theology needs empirical research to develop a critical, methodological verifiable theological theory of today's religious praxis. Through research, a practical theological theory is tested, and evaluated. Empirical research aims at falsifying the theoretical conceptions that one holds of religious praxis. In this way, empirical theological research is productive, in the sense that it can lead to new theory building. But the theological ideas that one holds about religious praxis are not just tested in reality; they are methodologically tested in order to make the results verifiable, repeatable, and generalizable.<sup>167</sup>

For Van der Ven, religious praxis or hermeneutic-communicative praxis is the exchange of meaning, understanding and mutual consensus between pastor, congregation, and society. Hermeneutic praxis stresses the fundamental place of hermeneutics in practical theology in general, and in empirical theology in particular.<sup>168</sup> Empirical theology uses sound empirical research to construct theological theories.<sup>169</sup>

Practical theology also contributes to social analysis, especially when using liberation theology to address issues relevant to diverse groups of people. In this sense, it seeks to transform church practice on a larger public scale. Moore acknowledges that in the United States, the diversity of race, culture and nationality is great, and there is a pressing need for theology to be relevant for diverse social contexts and critical public issues. Thus, many practical theologians engage in social analysis for the purpose of stirring public discourse and guiding transformed action, both in the church and in society.<sup>170</sup> A social analytical approach to practical theology is relevant to this study

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<sup>167</sup> C. A. M. Hermans and Mary Elizabeth Moore, "The Contribution of Empirical Theology By Johannes A. Van der Ven: An introduction," in *Hermeneutics and Empirical Research in Practical Theology: The Contribution of Empirical Theology by Johannes A. van der Ven*, ed. Chris A. M. Hermans and Mary Elizabeth Moore, vol. 11 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2004), 4.

<sup>168</sup> Hermans and Moore, "The Contribution of Empirical Theology " 9-10.

<sup>169</sup> Hermans and Moore, "The Contribution of Empirical Theology " 9.

<sup>170</sup> Mary Elizabeth Moore, "Purposes of Practical Theology: A Comparative Analysis Between United States Practical Theologians and Johannes Van Der Ven," in *Hermeneutics and Empirical*

because patriarchal and heterosexist views about family norms underlie how society views single African American mothers and attribute social problems to their children. Liberation theology is concerned with seeking justice and freedom for those who are oppressed and marginalized like single African American mothers who are present throughout African American churches. Liberating single African American mothers from patriarchal ideals about family formation and their complicity in creating social problems of which they are blamed, calls for transforming how society and the African American church views and cares for single African American mothers as a legitimate family form inclusive of all the rights and privileges of other families considered to be “normal.”

#### Hermeneutical Method: Four Tasks of Contemporary Practical Theology

Richard Osmer and Friedrich Schweitzer view contemporary practical theology as carrying out four mutually influential tasks: descriptive-empirical, interpretive, normative, and pragmatic.<sup>171</sup> The dissertation’s primary method uses Osmer’s more recent work, which develops these four tasks of practical theology with four questions: What is going on; Why is this going on; What ought to be going on; and How might we respond?<sup>172</sup>

The descriptive-empirical task begins with episodes, situations, or contexts that call for interpretation. It seeks to answer the question, what is going on? The interpretive task investigates the phenomena observed in the descriptive task. The key question for

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*Research in Practical Theology: The Contribution of Empirical Theology by Johannes A. van der Ven*, ed. Chris A. M. Hermans and Mary E. Moore (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 177.

<sup>171</sup> Richard R. Osmer and Friedrich Schweitzer, "Developing a public faith: new directions in practical theology," in *Developing a public faith: new directions in practical theology*, ed. Richard Robert Osmer and Friedrich Schweitzer (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003), 1-5.

<sup>172</sup> Osmer, *Practical theology*, 4.

this task is, why is this going on? It draws on theories from various disciplines to understand the issues embedded within the episodes, situations and contexts observed. The normative task, also known as “prophetic discernment,” asks, what ought to be going on? It is accomplished through theological interpretation of present episodes, situations, and contexts. The normative task involves theological reflection on ethical principles and rules to guide practice toward moral ends. Another way of describing the normative task is creating a model of good practice from the past or present and to generate new understandings of God, the Christian life, and social values beyond those provided by the received tradition.<sup>173</sup>

Practical theological norms ground the interpretive and normative tasks in spirituality and practices of discernment.<sup>174</sup> Crucial questions that congregational leaders must ask in response to situations and persons in their faith communities are important for this discernment process. The pragmatic task, given what we have learned from the previous three tasks, asks, “How might we respond?”

I am appreciative of Osmer’s four-task practical theological method because it is sufficient for the goal of this dissertation. However, because my subjects are single African American mothers, I employ a practical theological model that is closely related to Osmer’s, yet womanist in orientation. That is, I am specifically interested in how pastoral and ecclesial praxis bring about life-giving ministries for the healing and flourishing of single African American mothers.<sup>175</sup> Moreover, in this dissertation I am most interested in a womanist approach to practical theology that is concerned with

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<sup>173</sup> Osmer, *Practical theology*, 137.

<sup>174</sup> Osmer, *Practical theology*, 137.

<sup>175</sup> Evelyn L. Parker, “Womanist theory,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell companion to practical theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 204.

ministry that brings liberation, healing, and wholeness to single African American mothers.

### Womanist Practical Theology

Womanist practical theological approaches continue to evolve but where this approach is employed, Evelyn Parker describes it as an “analytical and reflexive process focused on the experiences and practices of African and African diasporic individual and corporate people of faith, which results in theological theories and practices scrutinized for their life-giving, transformational effect.”<sup>176</sup> Four questions she poses to theologians and practitioners are important for this dissertation: “How must we care for the body and soul of a African American woman? How is she God’s unique gift to herself, her community, and the global society? What is the nature of care and counseling that gives her life in abundance? What are her experiences and how are her stories fundamental to life-giving pastoral care practices?”<sup>177</sup>

Womanist thought examines race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and ecological justice within the lived experience of African American women in church, society, and family.<sup>178</sup> It includes deconstructing and reconstructing biblical, theological, and pastoral perspectives in which African American women seek agency in church and society.<sup>179</sup> Because I am concerned with issues of embodiment in single African American mothers, I use womanist practical theologian Phillis Sheppard’s method described in her article, *A Dark Goodness Created in the Image of God: Womanist Notes toward a Practical Theology of Black Women's Embodiment*. She explains,

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<sup>176</sup> Parker, "Womanist theory," 204.

<sup>177</sup> Parker, "Womanist theory," 206.

<sup>178</sup> Parker, "Womanist theory," 204.

<sup>179</sup> Parker, "Womanist theory," 205.

When we seek to understand black women's embodiment, we must contextualize their experiences through a historically informed critical social analysis. Therefore, a womanist practical theology of embodiment will approach the task of articulating a practical theology of embodiment by engaging in sources that give us entry into the lives of black women, will employ a methodology that takes social location seriously, and will bring forward a theological analysis and content that suggests ethical norms for embodied relationships that address how we treat ourselves and others.<sup>180</sup>

It has four interlocking features:

1. "*Sources*: experience, cultural and religious expressions, i.e. literature, music, art, biblical texts;
2. *Methodology*: includes social analysis; historical contextualization; sustaining a dialogical stance toward other liberation oriented theologies; benefiting from the efforts of other scholars in the human and social sciences by employing an interdisciplinary approach; re-reading the biblical texts, for examples of the voices of those who have been marginalized, who are models for inspired resistance to oppression as well re-reading our inherited Christian tradition for liberative traditions that have been overlooked in earlier readings;
3. *Content*: theological reflection and ethical norms for relationships, embodied spirituality;
4. *Practices*: justice work, worship, parish-based pastoral care."<sup>181</sup>

The theological conclusions drawn from this method are *real* rather than abstract and removed from single African American mothers' lives.<sup>182</sup> The four steps are similar to all four tasks outlined by Osmer and Schweitzer; however, the point of departure is the effect of racism, sexism, and classism in the lives of single African American mothers. Most importantly, the point of entry is the life experiences from the perspective of single African American mothers.

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<sup>180</sup> Phillis Isabella Sheppard, "A Dark Goodness Created in the Image of God: Womanist Notes Toward a Practical Theology of Black Women's Embodiment," *The Covenant Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (August 2003): 10-11.

<sup>181</sup> Sheppard, "A Dark Goodness Created in the Image of God," 11.

<sup>182</sup> Sheppard, "A Dark Goodness Created in the Image of God," 11.

## Womanist Practical Theology and Single African American Mothers

A study attending to single African American mothers' pain and suffering is inherently complex by virtue of the intersecting layers of racism, sexism, classism, and family structure. As delineated by Osmer's four-task framework and the particularities of womanist practical theological method, a multidisciplinary approach is necessary. Thus, I organize my practical theological approach by (1) examining the lives of single African American mothers; (2) conducting a psychosocial analysis and historical examination of single African American mothers and their experiences of cultural and relational trauma; (3) providing a practical theological reflection that suggests norms for good practice (4) and recommending a pastoral care and counseling model for single African American mothers.

### *Examining the Life Experiences of Single African American Mothers*

To understand how single African American mothers cope with the challenges of solo parenting and the resistance strategies related to cultural and relational trauma, I began by listening attentively to responses of open-ended questions posed to ten single African American mothers about their experience, relationships with their children's fathers, challenges, coping resources, experiences and perceptions of cultural trauma, and instances of relational trauma. I documented and analyzed my conversations with the women focusing on how these experiences affect their well being.

### *Sociocultural and Historical Context of Single African American Mothers*

The second movement calls for an interdisciplinary dialogue where I contextualize emergent themes from my analysis of the research participant's transcripts. In this section, I briefly outline the theorists and areas of research I use to examine the

broader contexts in which single African American mothers experiences of cultural and relational trauma are embedded. First, I examine theories of trauma primarily focusing on Maria Root's theory of insidious trauma. I then deconstruct theories of controlling images, using black feminist thought and Patricia Hill Collins' theory of controlling images in conversation with sociologist Mellissa Harris-Perry's examination of stereotypes and shame in *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*<sup>183</sup> and Maureen Walker's appropriation of controlling images in relational cultural theory. I also include insights from womanist practical theologians, womanist ethicists, and womanist theologians.

I argue that single African American mothers' resistance to controlling images manifests into another controlling image—the *strong black woman*. I explore the deleterious effects of the image, imposed upon African American women and self-imposed, by examining African American history connecting the ideology of the *strong black woman* to the proliferation of controlling images during slavery. As this is a multidisciplinary endeavor, I also explore psychological, sociological, theological, and womanist practical theological theories of strength in conversation with Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant theory of the *strong black woman* used “to defend and maintain a stratified social order by obscuring Black women's experiences of pain and suffering, acts of desperation, and anger.”<sup>184</sup> Following this discussion on cultural trauma and the *strong black woman*, I discuss my view of relational trauma by examining research on interpersonal violence and theories of grief and loss in conversation with Pauline Boss'

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<sup>183</sup> Melissa V. Harris-Perry, *Sister citizen: shame, stereotypes, and Black women in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

<sup>184</sup> Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, *Behind the mask of the strong black woman: voice and the embodiment of a costly performance* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 2.



theory of ambiguous loss and Kenneth Doka's theory of disenfranchised grief.

### *A Womanist Pastoral Theology of Connection and Family*

In the third movement, I propose a womanist pastoral theology of connection. Here, I offer a practical theological analysis of attending to the well being of single African American mothers using Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. I contend, through theological reflection, that this encounter demonstrates how black churches should care for marginalized and disenfranchised women in general and single mothers in particular. During the second part of the movement, I provide ethical and practical norms for enfranchising single African American mothers' loss and grief. The third part offers norms for single African American mothers to embody healthier and more enlivening God-, self-, and mother-images to help them use their strength in connection with others. The final part of the third movement offers womanist family theology for black churches. Here, I argue that even though the black church seeks to embody the village motif, it needs to go further by embracing all family types and demonstrating this through ministries to all families regardless of patriarchal norms. I argue that the black church can embody an inclusive family theology by providing safer sacred spaces for all families through intentional caring liturgies and rituals.

### *Pastoral Care and Counseling with Single African American Mothers*

In the final movement I describe, my pastoral care and counseling approach with single African American mothers. This includes revisions, additions, and theoretical underpinnings to existing models of relationship education.

### Research Method: Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

The main research questions for a project guide the process of identifying the

most suitable method for a research project. The overarching research question guiding this study is: how can single African American mothers, who are the primary caregivers for their children, inform a womanist approach to pastoral care and counseling in African American churches? An additional research question specifies the first question: How can existing relationship education curricula be augmented to address the effect of cultural and relational trauma on the quality of life of single African American mothers? I sought to answer these questions by first seeking to understand how single African American mothers describe their challenges and relational experiences. I was also very interested in their thoughts and feelings about perceptions of single African American mothers and why they believe the numbers of single African American mothers are increasing.

Qualitative methodology is appropriate for exploring the lived experiences of single African American mothers. Understanding is a key component of qualitative research because it is grounded in the human sciences. Qualitative approaches are focused on human experience and trying to access the meaning that the research participants make of their experience in the context of their cultural and interpersonal environments.<sup>185</sup> This study uses interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA “is concerned with the detailed examination of human lived experience. It aims to conduct this examination by enabling that experience to be expressed in its own terms, rather than according to predefined category systems.”<sup>186</sup> Thus, IPA captures and describes how people experience a given phenomenon—how they perceive, describe, feel, judge, remember, make sense of, and talk about the experience with others.

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<sup>185</sup> Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2002), 33.

<sup>186</sup> Jonathan A. Smith, Paul Flowers, and Michael Larkin, *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: theory, method and research* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2009), 32.

IPA's threefold methodological approach is phenomenological, hermeneutic, and idiographic. It is phenomenological because it is primarily concerned with the lived experience of the research participant. In this dissertation, it is the lived experience of ten (n=10) single African American mothers. Experience refers to how the research participant perceives, understands, and relates to her cultural and interpersonal world and to her sense of self within her world. Second, IPA entails a "double hermeneutic" or the meaning that the research participant makes of her lived experience and the researcher's perception of the research participant's thoughts about that experience.<sup>187</sup> Thus, while IPA is a phenomenological approach, the researcher's attempt to understand the participant's lived experience is a subjective and reflective process of interpretation, in which the researcher explicitly enters into the research process.<sup>188</sup> Finally, IPA is idiographic because it is concerned with a particular, or a focused understanding of how a phenomenon is experienced by a *particular people* in a *particular context*. Therefore, my goal was to provide a comprehensive, *thick description* of these experiences by exploring the research participants' constructed meanings, using their language as much as possible. The next section describes the procedures used for selecting my research participants.

### Research Participants

I selected my research participants through criterion, purposeful, and convenience sampling. Criterion sampling meets a predetermined criterion. Inclusion criteria for the research participants were: single African American mothers over twenty-five; having at least a high school education; self-identified as Christian or some experience exploring

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<sup>187</sup> Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretative phenomenological analysis*, 35.

<sup>188</sup> K. Reid, P. Flowers, and M. Larkin, "Exploring lived experience: An Introduction to Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis," *The Psychologist* 18, no. 1 (January 2005): 20.

Christianity; and they had or have primary physical and financial responsibility for their children. The researcher chose participants over twenty-five with at least a high school education because I anticipated that the participants, from a developmental perspective, would be better able to reflect on their experience. The researcher chose participants with primary financial and physical responsibility for their children because I argue that this group of single African American mothers can benefit from a pastoral care and counseling approach that helps them use their latent resources to liberate themselves from embodied controlling images, grieve losses related to relational trauma, and help them learn healthier ways of managing the challenges of being the sole caregiver for their children.

Purposeful sampling is intentionally choosing participants with information rich stories.<sup>189</sup> The researcher chose women who were atypical single African American mothers, especially seeking women who do not fit the stereotype of the poor mothers on which most research on single African American mothers focuses. Convenience sampling was chosen based on accessibility and location. The researcher originally planned to use a “snowball” sample, but instead chose convenience sampling because of the researcher’s membership and accessibility to organizations where it was likely that single African American mothers meeting the criteria would be present. Five of the research participants are members of a prominent African American sorority, two are affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and the researcher’s friends referred the final three research participants.

The researcher invited twenty-five single African American mothers by telephone and email. I explained the details of the research and answered questions posed by

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<sup>189</sup> Patton, *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*, 230.

potential participants. A formal letter was also sent if the women wanted a “hard copy” of our phone conversation. Fifteen of the twenty-five women accepted my invitation. The researcher contacted all of the women to schedule interviews. Though the target sample size was ten ( $n=10$ ) to fit IPA’s preference for smaller sample sizes,<sup>190</sup> the researcher anticipated that some of the women would not be available even though they initially agreed to participate. The hope was to have a cushion in the event that this was the case. The researcher was mindful of the demands on time and possible emergencies that could have arisen for those whose children were still home fulltime. Five women, after initially agreeing to participate in the study, chose not to participate, leaving the final sample size at ten ( $n=10$ ).

Ten self-identified single African American mothers ranging from 27 to 57 years of age comprised the final sample. The sample is diverse. Three are divorced, three have children from multiple fathers, and four were teen mothers. Five participants completed high school, one completed college, three completed Masters degrees, and one completed law school. Two research participants are full time students, one in college, and another is pursuing a doctoral degree. By self-description, all of the women have experienced some form of relational trauma. Half of the women come from two-parent homes and the other half were either raised by a single mother or their parents divorced during their adolescent years. The next section describes the data collection procedures.

### Data Collection

Various approaches to qualitative research prefer some data-collection methods to others. IPA prefers in-depth interviews because it invites rich, detailed, first person

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<sup>190</sup> IPA recommends sample sizes between 3 to 6 participants for novice researchers.

account of experience.<sup>191</sup> Open-ended and semi-structured interviews included several themes related to the goals of this study (See Appendix A). I asked each of the women to tell me something about their family, education, significant relationships, what happened in their lives, and their thoughts and feelings about the perceptions and growth of single African American mothers. The women provided their preferred time, and private-distraction-free location for the interview. This was done for two reasons: for confidentiality and to allow the participants to focus on the researcher's questions. All interviews were face-to-face. One woman lived with her parents, so we agreed to meet in a private room in a local library.

The participants were not compensated; however, for the women with young children, the researcher offered to pay for a babysitter of their choice if it interfered with finding a convenient time and location for the interview. This was not required as these women were able to schedule the interviews during a time when their children were in school or daycare. The research participants consented to the interview by signing the "Informed Consent for Interview" form (see Appendix B). This explained the details of the research, interview procedures, a statement about the risks of sharing sensitive information, and procedures for data collection. Smith notes that this is necessary because the entire data collection process requires sensitivity and care, especially if the interview is upsetting.<sup>192</sup> I explained that if the interviews became emotionally upsetting, we would stop the interview. A smartphone digital recorder captured all interviews and the researcher transcribed them verbatim with Microsoft Word.

During the interviews, every attempt was made to give the research participants

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<sup>191</sup> Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretative phenomenological analysis*, 56.

<sup>192</sup> Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretative phenomenological analysis*, 54.

enough time to respond to each question before I went on to the next question. I used open, probing, and closed questions. Open questions were used to encourage as much information as the research participant was willing to share. Probing questions were used to solicit more detail or to help the research participant expand their answers to obtain more detail. To ensure a thorough understating of the information provided, closed questions were only used to clarify or summarize an answer.

The interviews were very challenging because this was my first time conducting qualitative research. At times, I found myself so immersed in the participant's answers that I strayed from the set questions. At other times, I empathized and sympathized when something difficult was shared that evoked sad and angry feelings. Several research participants cried during the interview. When this happened, to make sure they were okay, I offered to stop, becoming more of a pastoral caregiver than researcher. Then I paused before moving to the next question. As I experienced the emotions of one research participant, I was more aware and better prepared to shift the interviews as necessary for the next research participant. The next section describes the data analysis process.

### Data Analysis

The transcripts were analyzed using the principles of IPA. The researcher followed the IPA six-step recommended guidelines: read and re-read verbatim transcripts; pay close attention to content and language for anything of interest; develop emergent themes; search for connections across emergent themes, move to the next transcript, and finally look for patterns across transcripts for a list of master themes. The

first step calls for “immersing oneself in the original data.”<sup>193</sup> The researcher listened to each recording twice before they were transcribed. The interviews were transcribed verbatim from beginning to end. After reading the transcripts three times each, the researcher proceeded to step two of the analysis process and noted ideas, themes and phrases in the right-hand margin of each transcript.

The researcher was careful to maintain the integrity of the participant's own words as distinct from the researcher's interpretations. The initial noting on the transcripts was followed by step three of the analysis process. Here, the researcher identified and labeled emergent themes, shifting the focus from the transcripts to ideas, emergent themes and phrases noted on the transcript in step two. This step involved grouping themes around similar thoughts, feelings, and ideas into super-ordinate themes. The fourth step of the analysis connected the emergent themes to new super-ordinate or similar higher-level themes. I used NVivo qualitative data-analysis software<sup>194</sup> to code emergent themes most relevant to the research question across transcripts. This process continued with each transcript, duplicating steps one through four. The final step connected emergent themes into master themes closely related to the research question. The next section describes the measures used to ensure data validity and reliability aligned with IPA's criteria.

### Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability are more common in positivist-influenced quantitative research. Positivism asserts that only scientific knowledge describes and measures a particular phenomenon. In contrast, qualitative research employs a naturalistic approach, which seeks to understand phenomena in *real world* settings where the researcher does

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<sup>193</sup> Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretative phenomenological analysis*, 79.

<sup>194</sup> Nvivo is a qualitative data analysis software package



not attempt to manipulate the phenomenon of interest.<sup>195</sup> Ultimately, quantitative and qualitative research data must be trustworthy and dependable. In other words, validity and reliability are also important to qualitative research. The validity and reliability of the data for this study rests upon my having adhered meticulously to the IPA data collection and analysis process. Thus, IPA assessment of validity and reliability is ensured by four principles: sensitivity to context; commitment and rigor; transparency and coherence; and impact and importance.<sup>196</sup>

Smith notes, “a good qualitative research study will demonstrate sensitivity to the context as IPA demonstrates sensitivity from the early stages of the research process.”<sup>197</sup> This researcher is fully aware that any research on single African American mothers calls for some level of cultural sensitivity because of the “social-cultural milieu in which they are situated.”<sup>198</sup> That is, tripartite oppression—racism, sexism, and classism—frames any discussion that seeks to liberate and heal single African American mothers from oppressive forces. I am also sensitive to contrasting literature, some praising and some denigrating single African American mothers.

In addition to adhering to cultural sensitivity, I demonstrated commitment and rigor by carefully attending to each research participant and analyzing each woman’s narrative.<sup>199</sup> Thus, the research participants’ social location as single African American mothers, the thoroughness with which they were selected, the appropriateness of their selection to the research question, and the intensity of the data analysis process

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<sup>195</sup> Patton, *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*, 39.

<sup>196</sup> The IPA approach to assessing validity and reliability is based on Lucy Yardley’s approach to qualitative research in psychology: Reid, Flowers, and Larkin, “Exploring lived experience.”

<sup>197</sup> Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretative phenomenological analysis*, 180.

<sup>198</sup> Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretative phenomenological analysis*, 180.

<sup>199</sup> Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretative phenomenological analysis*, 181.

demonstrates sufficient IPA rigor. Transparency and coherence clarifies the research process and describes the argument presented. The final principle of reliability and validity—that is, the impact and importance of this study has been described in chapter one.

The next section describes my self-reflexive process. Reflexivity is the researcher's critical process of self-reflection carried out to monitor and respond to the ways in which one's own values, experiences, interests, beliefs, political commitments, wider aims in life, and social identity have shaped and been affected by the research.<sup>200</sup>

### Self-Reflexive Process

Qualitative research approaches such as IPA pay particular attention to validity and reliability threats arising from the researchers themselves, who are immersed in the whole research process.<sup>201</sup> This ongoing process of reflexivity is an essential part of the repetitive process of data collection, analysis, and reflection. Thus, reflexivity emphasizes critical self-awareness and the way in which the researcher's own values, experiences, interests, assumptions and preconceptions are likely to influence the collection and interpretation of qualitative data, and to recognize the impossibility of maintaining an objective stance to the subject matter.<sup>202</sup>

I remained self-aware throughout this study, and I tried to understand how my own values, experiences, interests, assumptions and preconceptions could influence the data collection and interpretation process. In addition to this critical self-awareness, I

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<sup>200</sup> John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical theology and qualitative research* (London: SCM, 2006), 59.

<sup>201</sup> Nahid Golafshani, "Understanding Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research," *The Qualitative Report* 8, no. 4 (December 2003).

<sup>202</sup> Carla Willig, *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology: Adventures in Theory and Methods* (New York: Open University Press, 2001).

reflected on personal changes that came when I immersed myself in the research participants' lived experiences. It is also important for me to contextualize this process as an African American woman conducting research on African American women. In their article on conducting qualitative research with African American women, Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett note, that self-reflexivity serves as an agent in promoting reconciliation of personal reasons for studying a certain population and the degree of accountability indebted to that population.<sup>203</sup>

My self-reflexive process began when I formulated my research problem and constructed the questions for my research participants. When I met with my adviser, she asked, "Why is this important to you?" This topic is important to me for three reasons. First as a single African American mother, I experienced many emotional, financial, and spiritual challenges from being the primary caregiver to my only child. Secondly, I felt marginalized in a former church community because my pastor routinely preached about marriage between a man and a woman and family in this context. According to his theological interpretation, I felt my family was abnormal. I eventually learned my experiences were similar to other single parents in my church. After I became involved with a small and informal community of single parents, I founded and directed the church's single-parent ministry. As director, I facilitated weekly gatherings for prayer and Bible study using a curriculum that guided us through discussions about the challenges of parenting alone. We also enjoyed monthly outings with and without our children.

Finally, this topic is important to me because I suffered for lack of safe places to

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<sup>203</sup> April L. Few, Dionne P. Stephens, and Marlo Rouse-Arnett, "Sister-to-Sister Talk: Transcending Boundaries and Challenges in Qualitative Research With Black Women," *Family Relations* 52, no. 3 (July 2003): 210.

express my emotions about my own relational traumas, disappointments, anger; and losses related to unrealized dreams, hopes and expectations for my relationship with my daughter's father. I struggled with feelings of unworthiness and I internalized those painful experiences. I also experienced cultural trauma because my awareness of stereotypes about single African American mothers forced me to do everything I could to make sure I was not a statistic. I embodied *the strong black woman* to hide the pain of my relational traumas and to ensure that my daughter was no different than children in two-parent families. My experience, along with the pain I hear when my wide circle of single African American mothers share stories of loss, sadness, inequities, infidelity, mistrust, abandonment, interpersonal violence, and apathy by the fathers of their children, motivates me to help. Because I am personally invested in this topic, my biases, perceptions, and opinions must be explicit so they will not influence the research process. Thus, my experiences, observations, concerns, and passion for the well being and quality of life of single African American mothers have led to this research.

I am mindful of the tension in doing qualitative research with African American women. I realize that the topic of single African American mothers is controversial and I want to be sensitive and accountable to my research participants so I do not perpetuate the myths and stereotypes for the study.

Those of us who are privileged to be the conduits of Black women's experiences—not necessarily the authors of such experiences—and who are accountable to African American communities, are also responsible for debunking racist and sexist stereotypes of African American women while being careful not to perpetuate multiple oppressions in their own works. As African American women, we are conscious of the image of Black women we present to academic and nonacademic communities. We are ever conscious of concern over how to resist the fear of “airing dirty laundry” to those outside of our communities when the outcome of what can be learned from tribulations and sufferings could save the physical lives and psychological wellbeing of other Black women and girls—a

concern shared by others.<sup>204</sup>

At the same time I want to honor the research participants' willingness to share their stories so that what we learn can inform pastoral care and counseling practices with other single African American mothers.

### Summary

This chapter provided a description of the dissertation's hermeneutical method. I am using Richard Osmer's four-task practical theological approach as my primary method and since my subjects are African American women, I augmented it with Phillis Sheppard's womanist practical theological approach. In this chapter, I described my rationale for using interpretive phenomenological analysis as my research methodology along with a description of: the research participants; the data collection and data analysis process; a statement on validity and reliability; and, my self-reflexive process. In the next chapter, I discuss the superordinate themes that emerged from analyzing the research participant's transcripts.

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<sup>204</sup> Few, Stephens, and Rouse-Arnett, "Sister-to-Sister Talk," 210.

### Chapter 3

#### 3. Behind the Veil of the Village

I don't understand how you define the term single mother because some people consider themselves to be single mothers but they still receive child support. I don't receive child support. I don't receive physical support so I feel like I am a single mother in every sense of the term. Some people call themselves single mothers and they get child support from the father and he's still a part of the children's lives so I feel like I am a single mother in its truest sense.

Kenya

#### Examining the Lives of Single African American Mothers

##### Introduction

Most perceptions about and concerns for single African American mothers come from politicians, sociologists, and other researchers more interested in explaining their formation, mandating employment, or encouraging marriage so that they are no longer an economic burden on society. Most of the concerns are directed towards low-income and welfare-dependent single African American mothers. Even those who are educated and gainfully employed are aware of the long-standing myths and stereotypes that are imposed on them. My empirical research examined the lives of ten (n=10) single African American mothers who are the primary caregivers of their children. The women, who graciously agreed to be research participants, became single mothers in a variety of ways: divorce, widowed, surrogacy, and by having children outside of marriage.

This chapter focuses on the women themselves. Each of the women were grateful for the opportunity to share their stories because it was the first time anyone asked them about their experience. All of the women told me it was cathartic. It is also important to note that they did not intend to raise their children without the fathers' financial, physical, and emotional support. After a brief description of each research participant, superordinate themes are highlighted. I use pseudonyms to protect their privacy.

## Profiles of the Research Participants

Susan is a 39-year-old single mother of a twenty-year old son and a nine-year old daughter. She has some college and she works as a case manager for a government agency. Susan had her son when she was nineteen. She described her son's father as a "young drug dealer." She stated, "neither one of us was ready for parenting, definitely not anywhere close to marriage." Susan declared that in spite the physical abuse she endured during their relationship,

I was excited to be a mother because I had a lot of support from my family. I didn't feel the fear or that I would not be able to do it because I was raised by my grandmother who was a very strong woman. By the time I had my son, my grandmother had passed, but I still felt that her spirit was with me and all the values and the morals that she raised me with. I felt pretty confident in my ability to parent so it wasn't as difficult.

Susan's daughter was intentional. Although she did not want more children after her son, on her 29<sup>th</sup> birthday, she reconsidered her decision to have more children. "I wasn't even lookin. [It] sounds crazy to me, but I wasn't looking for a relationship. I just felt that I wanted a baby um then you know I met my daughter's dad." Susan met a young man who she says was "different than the other guys I dated." She described most of the men in her neighborhood as "drug boys" who were "not really focused on anything." Her daughter's father was different because he had a job. "I thought at this point that maybe you know we could have a future together."

Susan ended the relationship after a few years because she "learned that he was not husband material." He was emotionally abusive and "he had some financial challenges, some work history challenges, and he even had issues with drug challenges, which put a strain on our relationship." Susan has relationships with both fathers.

With my son's father, I would say that within the last, maybe two years, we have

a much better relationship, much better than it's ever been before. We're able to communicate and come to grips with uh parenting now an adult child. So it's gotten better over the years.

Susan also maintains a cordial relationship with her daughter's father.

Kim is a 57-year-old twice-divorced single mother of four children by three different fathers. Her two daughters and two sons are ages 41, 35, 33, and 20. She is a high school graduate and a recently retired government employee. Kim's oldest child is developmentally delayed and the result of an eight-year incestuous relationship with her stepfather. When Kim told her mother about the pregnancy and the abuse, she "kicked her out" of her home. Kim moved with an Aunt to give birth to her daughter when she was fifteen years old. Six years later, Kim met and "fell in love" with her second child's father. Before the birth of her second child, she told me that she aborted several pregnancies. She said,

Those pregnancies just happened and at the time I was like, oh no, I ain't finna have no more babies because I was overwhelmed with caring for my daughter who had many health problems and surgeries during her first five years of life. It was just so many things that I had to do with her. I could not have another baby and that was my reasoning for not having those babies you know.

Kim was "was so convicted" after she became pregnant for a third time. So much that "abortion didn't enter my mind. I said, 'I can't do that!' So, I had the baby and I was happy. I did not have no money but I was happy." Shortly after she announced her pregnancy to her boyfriend, he left and married another woman.

Kim met her third child's father while she was pregnant with her second daughter.

He was in the service, and he liked me. I was pregnant and he knew I was pregnant. I wasn't dating him but we were kinda talking you know and so when this happened, I just said ok. He wanted to be with me so we started seeing each other."



The relationship ended before her daughter's birth but he returned after the baby was born and claimed her as his own.

Even though she did not want to be with him, they married and her third child, a son, was born eighteen months after her daughter. Kim ended her marriage nine years later after she grew tired of him emotionally abusing her children and after he disowned the daughter that he earlier claimed as his own. Kim said "the break up was hard because I was use to the family unit" though she added, "If the inside of that unit ain't together, you know the kids are suffering." Kim returned to the home she left to try and make the relationship work, but she discovered he had packed his belongings and moved out. She said, "I was angry but I was glad that he was gone."

Kim's fourth child, a son, was born after she reconnected to her second daughter's father--years after he had abandoned her to remarry another woman. Although he was still married and separated from his wife, they dated for a time before he divorced his wife and married Kim. After they got married, she learned, "he was using cocaine and he got me hooked on cocaine. So I started using drugs and then I found out I was pregnant again." Kim continued to use drugs while pregnant with her son. She was married for three years when she and her husband were arrested for possession of drugs. Kim continued to work while her mother kept her children. She eventually went into a drug rehabilitation program. After Kim completed the difficult ninety-day program, she divorced her husband, and reclaimed her children.

Kim's eldest daughter has been in a group home since she was twenty-years old because she thought she would get better care. Kim has a tenuous to non-existing relationships with the fathers of her three children. She stated that they have been

sporadically involved in the children's lives and that her mother helped her raise the children before she died of cancer.

Sylvia is a 44-year-old divorced mother of four children. Her daughter is 28, and her three sons are 24, 22, and 20. Sylvia has a GED and she is a full-time college student.

Sylvia never thought about being a mother. She said getting pregnant at sixteen was due to,

lack of education. I could really charge mines to lack of education because we weren't educated about the functions of the boy and the girl and the birds and the bees. We didn't get that training. My training was you'll get pregnant if you kiss him so I didn't kiss him.

When Sylvia discovered she was pregnant, she did not tell her mother because she feared that she would to have to abort the baby. She said,

When I had an inkling that I was pregnant, I kept it to myself because if I would've told my mom, she would have made me have an abortion. I knew at sixteen, I wasn't supposed to have no abortion. My mom did not find out until I was too far along to have an abortion.

Sylvia's mother was "angry and upset" when she found out about the baby and she told her, "You will have it and you will raise it." Sylvia said, "It was the best thing she ever did for me. Cause I love my children. I don't think I woulda had children cause I woulda went to college and got me a education."

Despite being a teenage mom, her boyfriend requested that they have more children but Sylvia insisted that they marry. After they married, she had three sons. Though Sylvia officially became a single mother after her twenty-year marriage ended in divorce, she said, "Even while I was married, I was a single mom." She described her husband as abusive, unfaithful and unavailable to help with their four children because "he spent most of his time with another woman and her children." Sylvia's ex-husband has remarried and she said she is intentional about maintaining their relationship in the

interest of her children.

He's married. It didn't matter what he did to me [because] I always tried to encourage him to do better than what he was doing. I've always done that even though I could have been the one to take his life, but I didn't because God didn't give me that spirit to do that. So, I've always encouraged him. I encouraged him to see his kids you know when he just flat out wouldn't see his kids. I'm like you can see ya kids anytime. [I] gave him the option and he wouldn't do it. I have no animosity towards him whatsoever. You know who you are because like I said he gotta tell God why just like I gotta answer for mine.

Pam is a 46-year-old divorced mother of a twenty-year-old daughter and a seventeen year-old son. She is an unemployed high school graduate pursuing a college degree part-time. Pam divorced after ten years of marriage. She described her marriage as a co-dependent, abusive relationship, and an unhealthy love where each was consumed with "saving" the other. Pam said after she had enough of her husband's drug use and abusive behavior, she moved out. She and the children moved to another city and she filed for divorce. Before the divorce was finalized, they reconciled three times when she realized he had not changed.

A year after the divorce was final, her ex-husband's sister died suddenly. Pam said after her death, his drug use increased and he abruptly left his stable job of twelve years and completely disappeared for two years. She described the divorce and his subsequent disappearance as "devastating" for she and her children. The children asked, "Where's my daddy?" Pam went into a "serious depression" and wondered why this happened. Feelings of abandonment, anger, resentment, bitterness, and embarrassment followed. Over the years, Pam reported that she and her children have had minimal contact with her ex-husband. He re-married and has other children. Pam continues to recover from the divorce, is coping with emotional and financial instability and using many resources to navigate the challenges of being a single mother to her teenage

children. She did not receive any physical or emotional support and is only now receiving backdated child support.

Erica is a 53-year-old divorced single mother of a twenty-three year old daughter and a twenty-year old son. She has a master's degree and works as a financial analyst. Erica's parents were married for forty-three years. She recalled their non-negotiable mandate that she and her siblings would graduate from college, marry and have children. She fulfilled her parent's wishes when she met and married her husband through a friend at church. Their daughter was born the first year of marriage; she had her son three years later. Erica's husband was physically abusive throughout the marriage. Erica was hospitalized after an abusive episode. Despite the ongoing abuse, she wanted her husband to go to counseling and attend domestic violence classes. He refused and they divorced a year later. Erica does not have good relationship with her ex-husband though she has had sporadic contact with him over the years. He has remarried, has provided no physical support, and very little court-mandated child support for their children.

Juanita is a 27-year-old single mother of a four-year old daughter. She is completing a master's degree and she works fulltime as a special education teacher. Juanita always wanted to be a mother. Juanita explained that she did not have sex when she was a teen because she wanted to save herself for that one special person. Juanita was a nineteen-year old virgin when she met her daughter's father. She waited a year before her first sexual experience. Later, her boyfriend approached her to have a baby. She insisted that they wait until she finished college. When Juanita discovered she was pregnant, she was happy because they tried for two months. Her happiness did not last because at six weeks pregnant, she discovered that her boyfriend was having a virtual

affair with a woman he met on a social media site. Juanita stayed with him until the birth of her daughter even though their relationship did not improve. She said,

After my daughter came, he wasn't being a good dad. Like he wasn't trying to pay attention to her [or] trying to do for her. It just seems like he just kinda checked out and I think at this point he was like, "Well we had the baby." So, I don't think he really had a plan for afterwards.

Unfortunately, Juanita's boyfriend continued the affair and he was not emotionally available to help parent their infant daughter. Juanita expressed shock and disappointment over her boyfriend's unexpected behavior.

I did not expect that to happen. I thought that if, you know, you stayed pure and you find that one you're supposed be with, you know, that's how its supposed to be. You know, and there was no outside. I always thought that if you were a good person, you know, and you don't go outside, then the person wouldn't do that to you. It [the affair] just blind-sided. When I found out it really blind-sided me. I had in my mind this was my man and we were going to have our family. That [leaving him] was one of the hardest decisions that I ever had to make because I was at a crossroads. You know, cause its like if I leave, then you know, now I gotta be the single mom; but if I stay, then its like well I'm settling because clearly he doesn't respect me if he's going behind my back. Its like well what am I teaching my child? You know what I'm saying? So I don't know. You know sometimes I think, like did I made the right decisions? Should I have tried to work it out with him again?

Juanita was overwhelmed by her feelings of disrespect, anger, loss, and the stress of negotiating all of the decisions to remain in the relationship for the sake of her daughter. Juanita eventually left the relationship and returned home to live with her parents. She still maintains a relationship with her daughter's father. He provides court-mandated child support, but no physical or emotional support.

Kenya is a 31-year-old single mother of a seven-year old daughter. She is a full time doctoral student. Kenya was raised in a strict Christian home. She sought her parents' permission to date at 16, but her parents did not allow her to date. She explored her sexuality in spite of her parent's rules. Kenya met her daughter's father while she was

away at college. She described him as a “friend with benefits.” During the relationship, she became pregnant with her daughter. After the birth of her daughter, Kenya felt that he was more interested in being with her than being a father to his daughter. She explained that their relationship suffered because her daughter’s father struggled with unemployment and mental illness. Kenya ended the relationship and returned home to live with her parents because he did not help with their daughter and she did not have enough money to care for her alone. She has had no contact with him since that time.

Lisa is a 39-year-old single mother of a two-year old daughter. She has a Jurist Doctorate and she works full time as an administrative law judge. Lisa always wanted to have children but she felt her biological clock was ticking with no real relationship prospects. At one time, she considered artificial insemination. Already financially stable, she was not concerned about caring for a child alone because she was prepared to be a single mother. Lisa was in an on-again-off-again relationship with her daughter’s father. She said,

I told him that I wanted to be a mother [and that] it was really important to me. So, I would say in the last year of the five-year period, I actively planned on having a child. And so, I told him I wanted to be a mom and he said I would love to have a child with you. He said, “But we need to get married.” I told him that I didn’t really want to get married right now. So I kept kinda putting him off on the whole marriage thing but we continued to be intermittently sexually active [and] I found out I was pregnant. I was very very happy.

Lisa did not immediately tell her boyfriend because their relationship was strained. She eventually shared the news with him. He was happy and asked her to marry him. Lisa turned him down because he refused her request to go to counseling for their relationship problems. Their relationship was further strained when he denied paternity shortly after her difficult birth.

I had to go to emergency and have a C-section. We kinda got into it because the day after I delivered [while] I was in my hospital bed; he was like “I don’t know if this is my baby I want a paternity test.” So, it just really ticked me off, but I told him fine you know whatever. So, I presented the material [and] paperwork to him and he never followed through with it. He later said to me “I know the child is mine and I don’t need a paternity test.” It really ticked me off that he was kind of just wishy washy. So to make a long story short, I knew that for me he would not be a suitable mate and I was going to have to raise this child on my own. I was happy to have a child.

Lisa has very little contact with her daughter’s father. He provides no physical, emotional, or financial support.

Dorothy is a 54-year-old single mother of a thirty-two year old daughter. She is a college graduate and is now self-employed. Dorothy spent most of her adolescent years with her grandparents in what she deemed to be a model-home environment. Her grandfather left home each morning while her grandmother cared for their home and provided everyone with home-cooked meals. Dorothy envisioned a similar family like hers and television images of families such as “Father’s Knows Best.” As a young woman, not certain about her sexual orientation, she imaged a Cinderella-like life with a husband, children, and a house with a white picket fence. She conceived her only child at twenty-one during an on-again-off-again affair with a married man.

She considered aborting the baby for financial reasons but she went through with the pregnancy after her roommate offered to help care for the child. When she told her lover about the baby, he insinuated that she wanted to get married.

When I first found out I got pregnant, I told him about it. His initial reaction was “You must want to get married?” I was like, no I don’t! I got an attitude! Im like I’m not having this baby for you to hold on to you. I was having the baby for me. I had no expectations of him at all. Nor did I want to be married to him at all. I knew when I had my baby that I was having my baby. I didn’t ever have any expectations from him. I felt like it was all on me and I would take care of her so overall, I’m glad I did it and I’m glad I didn’t have an abortion.

Dorothy has no contact with her daughter's father. She says over the years, he provided no physical and emotional support; and very little financial support.

Ann is a 32-year-old single mother of three children by three different fathers. She has a high school diploma and she works as a customer service representative. Her son and two daughters are ages 17, 15, and 10. Ann did not plan her children. She explained that she was interested in sex when she was fourteen because "everybody was talking about it in school." Before engaging in any sexual activity, she told her mother of her curiosity, however, Ann's mother refused to talk with her. Subsequently, she and her boyfriend at the time "had sex." Ann stated, "I immediately got pregnant."

When Ann discovered her pregnancy, she was afraid to tell her mother because she expected that her mother would be angry. She did not tell her mother and having lived with a relative during most of her pregnancy, she had a son. Shortly after his birth, Ann returned to live with her mother (who was angry). Later, her mother moved in with a boyfriend and left Ann to raise her son alone. Her boyfriend also left to do his "own thing."

At sixteen, Ann had a second child after she met an older man who cared for her and her son. She described their relationship as "crazy." When she became pregnant with his child, she explained "I got pregnant because I didn't use any type of birth control." Ann's boyfriend asked her to abort the baby after she told him she was pregnant. Ann did not abort the baby because "I did not believe in abortion." She ended the relationship with her daughter's father because he was not committed to their relationship and he offered little physical and financial support after her birth.

Ann had a third child when she was 21 through a surrogate pregnancy. She



reluctantly agreed to have a baby for an aunt who could not bear children of her own until she changed her mind nine months into her pregnancy. Ann explained that prior to her third child, she did not want other children because her “life had improved enough with a job that allowed me to have just enough money to take care of the two [children] without assistance.” Ann debated the consequences and cost of having another child, but she changed her mind when she observed the couple arguing and felt that her baby would not be safe with them. Keeping the baby “devastated” her aunt and caused a “big rift” in her family.

When Ann reflected on the circumstances surrounding the birth of her three children, she admitted that she was “completely oblivious about life until I had my daughter.” She did not “consciously think about” the choices of being in relationship with her children’s fathers nor did she intend to have their children. Ann’s sons’ father is deceased. She does not have a good relationship with her second child’s father and she does not have a relationship with her youngest child’s father.

## Results

This section describes the research participants’ lived experience that emerged from an in-depth analysis of the transcripts. The section also reflects the double hermeneutic of the IPA approach, in that the findings also convey the researchers’ interpretation of the research participants’ interpretation of their experience.<sup>205</sup> There are seven main superordinate themes: *Challenges of single African American mothers; Judged and stereotyped; Coping with challenges and stereotypes; Trauma, loss and abandonment; Self-Evaluation; and Experience of God, religion, and church.*

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<sup>205</sup> Smith, Flowers, and Larkin, *Interpretative phenomenological analysis*, 3.

Table 4.1

Challenges of Single African American Mothers

- Financial
  - Working several jobs
  - Unable to secure child support
- Emotional
  - Guilt and Shame
  - Role Strain
  - Isolation
- Relational
  - Raising children without the support of their fathers
  - Managing relationships with the children's fathers

Judged and Stereotyped

- Typical Statistic
- No family values
- Sexually promiscuous and a baby factory
- Expect the worst of the children
- Media portrays us negatively
- They think I'm on welfare
- Overbearing and mean
- Uneducated and ghetto

Coping with the Challenges and Stereotypes

- Resources
  - Family and friends
  - Job
  - Faith
- Strength and Independence
  - Fine with being a single mother
  - Model the strong women role models in my family
- Self-Sacrifice and Overcompensating
  - I have to prove that I am capable
  - Self-Sacrifice

Trauma, Loss and Abandonment

- History of interpersonal violence
- Children have no relationship with their fathers
- Loss of relationship hopes and dreams due to divorce or separation
  - Bitterness and Anger

- Resentment
- Rejection
- Confusion

### Self-Evaluation

- I did the best I could
- I would have done some things differently
- I will do (did) some things differently (comparing myself to my mother)

### Experience of God, Religion, and Church

- God
- Church

It is important to note that while the superordinate themes and the subsequent sub-themes are described individually, each occurred within the context of a wider account of the research participant's lives. Only this wider account, which is beyond the scope of this project, can fully convey the complex nature of the connected data across themes.

### Emergent Themes

### Challenges of Single African American Mothers

Three sub-themes emerged under the superordinate theme of *challenges*: *financial, emotional, and relational*.

#### *Financial*

Research has shown that single Black mothers have greater economic challenges than single mothers from other ethnicities.<sup>206</sup> This is due to the disproportionate number of young welfare-dependent mothers. Nonetheless, these research participants demonstrated that they were capable of providing for their children's basic needs. Some worked several jobs, sacrificing their own needs to make sure that their children enjoyed extracurricular activities. Others were only able to meet their basic needs. Part of the

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<sup>206</sup> Nancy E. Dowd, *In defense of single-parent families* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 105.

financial challenges for some of the research participants entailed working with their children's fathers and the court system to secure child support. This was only applicable for the women who were divorced or for those women who remained in contact with their child's father at some level. Some of the research participants were unable to work out a suitable financial agreement so they elected to secure court-ordered child support either because an informal agreement could not be worked out or because the fathers refused to pay anything. Some of the research participants never asked for financial support. All but one research participant named finances as a challenge.

Sylvia recalled that she worked several jobs while raising her children. Still, she remembered times when she could not meet the needs of her household.

We did without you know, a many, a days but we had each other you know. I worked. I've always worked. I got my first job at 18. I've always worked 2 and 3 jobs just trying to make it.

Kenya says her daughter's basic needs are met but she admitted that having some financial support from her daughter's father would help. She says managing her meager finances is stressful.

Financially, it's been hard. You know, I've had to make some decisions. Sometimes I look back and like, "Am I making the right decisions?" Thinking, "should I be in school and only working part time?" So initially, financially was really hard because he did not have a job at the time and this was when he was still in her life. He was in her life until she was three or four. So, it was hard because he was not working and I was working a job but then I moved back home so I can have the support of my parents and not have to pay rent but that didn't last for no time. So, it's been hard. It's been a challenge because there are things I would like. Well my daughter is blessed. She needs nothing. She lacks nothing. But before it was hard because even if I needed clothes, I couldn't buy her clothes. I would always receive hand me downs which was a blessing because they always came on time.

But you know, I think if I had a second income, and that's one of the things I feel kind of bad about is that I don't have two incomes. I don't dwell on that but when I think about the people that do have two incomes, I'm like you're so lucky you

have two incomes and I have one. So, it kinda hurts not to have that support financially. Even if her dad wasn't in her life, but if I was getting child support from him, um I think that would help. But I think I would really want to put that money in a college fund for her and not spend it. So, I think financial resources in that aspect would be helpful.

While Kenya could only envision having financial support, Erica reflected on the challenges of losing her husband's income after they divorced. She maintained her lifestyle by working two jobs, which meant that she sacrificed time with her children. Working two jobs also allowed her to keep the home she and her husband purchased before the divorce.

I tell you it was tough! At the beginning, after the divorce was tough! I had uh a little small business, home based business to try to work you know so I could make extra money. My bosses would let me work as much overtime as I could work. Sometimes I would literally just come home change my clothes and go back to work cause I did not want to lose the house. It was difficult because I had to pay attention to my job because I needed it but I had these kids and that's what babysat them a lot of times [pointing to the rack of Disney and Veggie Tales movies].

Managing finances was also stressful for Dorothy.

You know what for me, I think it was difficult because I didn't realize how expensive it [raising a child alone] was and I was not financially prepared for it. But I didn't let that bother me, um financially. All I can say is financially it hit me. I mean you know, I made it happen and I was gonna make it happen. I made sure that my rent was paid. You know at that time there wasn't a thing called cable so you know I just made sure that my rent was paid. I made sure I had food. My hardest struggle that I remember was buying formula and having to take bottles to the store and stuff like that to get enough money to buy her formula. When I look back on it now, I struggled because I wasn't making a lot of money but I was able to maintain.

Some of the women took legal action to secure child support from their children's fathers. Some were successful and others expressed frustration because they did not receive payments even when they were mandated.

Ann tried to secure child support from her second child's father but the court case

was eventually closed without a mandate.

He has money! I've taken him to child support [court] even though he lives right down the street and he makes an awful lot of money. But for some reason, they just can't get him to court and because they couldn't get him to court, they put out a bench warrant out for his arrest. It took a year and he was never arrested cause he's not that type to get arrested and they dropped the case. I was like we're just going to close the case.

Erica was frustrated because her ex-husband successfully reduced his mandated child support payments.

He paid child support early on but after the divorce, he wasn't working and supposedly, he's still not working. I think he paid \$25 a month per child because in the state where we lived, they say you can pick up cans during the month and get \$25 so that's the minimum you have to pay at least \$25. So \$25 per child and when my daughter turned 18, the same week she turned 18, he called support enforcement to let them know that she was 18 and to cut her off. Same thing for my son. So you would think why don't you write the \$25 check and send it to them? After the divorce, he had to pay a little bit more for a time when he was getting his unemployment, but somehow he kept going to court. I didn't want to keep flying back and forth [because] it was just too expensive so whatever was decided in the courts, he was able to get it down to the minimum.

Juanita had child support enforced after she and her daughter's father failed to work out an agreement.

We got court ordered child support. We tried to work it out between us but then he started coming late and dodging my phone calls and I was like, I don't have time! I really tried to avoid going that route because it shouldn't have to go that route. Like I could see if were kind of questioning whether or not she's your child. But you know, she's your child so why would you not want to help with that? I just couldn't deal with all that, [him saying] "Well you know I gotta pay this." I don't care what you have to pay! I have to pay things too! I have a car note and at the same time, I'm not going to have my baby walking around naked! You know, [I'm] just not even going to deal with all that. I just went ahead and got the child support you know. Now that comes regularly and it's not a lot. It's something.

Pam's ex-husband reneged on their child support agreement until his wages were garnished for non-payment.

We went through the court system and um the judge just laid it all out. I had all

the documentation and I just turned it in to the county and um they just basically garnered his wages. The child support balance was like \$75,000. Some of it is in arrears. He's paying it now because he's working now. So, when he's working they will garnish his wages.

### *Emotional*

Finding time to work and spending time with their children was a consistent theme during my conversations with the research participants. Some of them expressed guilty feelings and they spoke about feeling isolated in spite of supportive friends and families. The research participants described this difficulty as “juggling” or being pulled in more than one direction at the same time. This is also described in scholarly literature as role strain or one’s “felt difficulty in fulfilling role obligations.”<sup>207</sup> All of the women expressed some guilt when they spoke about the stress of role strain.

Kenya and Juanita are young mothers, and both are pursuing graduate education while working. Juanita said,

Going to school is a challenge and getting an education is challenging with a child. It's hard cause I feel like a lot of my time has to go to school and so when I did have those breaks, I always tried to make it a mommy daughter thing so she still has some mommy time. But it's hard, there are a lot of things, like you know, I wish I could have. You know more time to spend with her and teach her more things.

Ann said “juggling” was inevitable because she did not have any support.

People underestimate this, having family like sisters that can back you makes it easier because I see my other friends and they have children and they have sisters and they could just, [friends speaking] “oh I'm going to take her over my sister's house.” Well I have a lot of brothers so I can't just take them over there. So, a lot of times I would have to leave them by themselves because I was going to work. I had to work. It was like I had to do this. I had to because I didn't have anything that was going to catch me if I fall; you know what I'm saying? Like I had to pay the mortgage, so I had to have a job. There was no way around that. So sometimes, I had to like leave them by themselves. It was a lot of juggling. All the time! Like it was a constant juggle! Like I had to go to work. I had to work at

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<sup>207</sup> William J. Goode, “A Theory of Role Strain,” *American Sociological Review* 25, no. 4 (August 1960).

night or I had to go to work on the weekends.

Susan said being “pulled in a lot of directions” was a challenge.

Having to be in 30 places at once is a challenge cause my son has to be over here and my daughter has to be over there. You know sometimes it gets frustrating even now with him being 20. He’s trying to find a job, he doesn’t have a car, there’s a lot of violence that goes on in different areas, so I’m not comfortable with him on public transportation. So me having to take him here and there and then my daughter being involved in all these extra activities. So, I’m kind of pulled in a lot of different directions.

Erica often felt guilty leaving her children alone so much. One of the hardest things was having enough time to spend with her children.

How do you put in the time? You know when you have a mother and father you can kinda share the duties. Sometimes I’d come home [and] I’m just beat you know. Half the time they had a babysitter--they was watching videos. I tried to make sure they got their homework done when I really didn’t get there until late. I always had to work a certain amount of hours so I could get the kids in a reasonable amount of time without being fined. Well sometimes I would go get them something to eat [then] try to get their homework. Luckily, I could log in from home and do a lot of work but it was getting the time that I needed to be in their lives. I felt like I didn’t have enough time to be in their lives too because if I don’t have this job, were we going to be living? You’re used to be in your own home, now what? So I was always struggling. That was my biggest challenge, trying to figure out how to get enough time with my kids and have enough energy to do [things with them]. My son wanted to do soccer. I put him in soccer for a while but I could not make all the events. I couldn’t get him to cub scouts and finding someone to do it for me wasn’t easy either.

Kim had a hard time caring for her developmentally delayed eldest daughter. She carried a lot of guilt because she blamed herself for the molestation and for her daughter’s condition until she got to a point where she could forgive herself.

And so, I was really carrying a lot of guilt for a long time because you know she was born with her disabilities and stuff. I was like man you know! So, God just showed me that it wasn’t my fault. You know, so you have to forgive yourself. You know, so I eventually, forgave myself. Cuz actually I just started thinking about this. I hadn’t talked about it to nobody. I just always said that was her father but had buried it so far.

Erica shared that she did not tell any of her close friends or sorority sisters about her



divorce because she was ashamed.

I'll never forget the national president was so happy to see me and she took me to her suite, we talked, and I told her what was going on. I said you're the first person I'm a tell, but I'm going through a divorce. I mean I didn't want to tell people. How can I tell people? [Thinking about what others will say.] What you mean you're divorced? You couldn't handle your marriage? What's going on?

In general, these challenges are common for most single parents. McAdoo adds that single African American mothers have an additional challenge of being African American and female. Due to racism and sexism, these factors contribute to stress and,

the severity of stress is affected by the economic and emotional resources available. Economically, some single African American mothers must deal with "poverty, high-crime areas, and poor educational facilities whereas, mothers who do not have the same basic economic needs may be more concerned with child care and household tasks."<sup>208</sup>

Emotionally, while single African American mothers bear the responsibility for their children, they also have to negotiate family and extended family relationships that are not always helpful.

Indeed, in a study of 318 middle-class and working-class single African American mothers, using psychological instruments to measure stress intensity, stress event frequency, gender specific stress, and stress bought on by religious beliefs and involvement, McAdoo found they were "highly stressed ... They were experiencing stress that can be considered destructive. It was so intense and occurring so frequently, that one wonders how they managed to function from day to day."<sup>209</sup> Many of the research participants acknowledged supportive friends and family, but they felt that even in the village, they were ultimately responsible for their children. In a study on well being and single African American mothers, Jackson found that some of the challenges I described

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<sup>208</sup> McAdoo, "Stress Levels, Family Help Patterns, and Religiosity," 427.

<sup>209</sup> McAdoo, "Stress Levels, Family Help Patterns, and Religiosity," 442-43.

in this study contributed to depression and decreased life satisfaction.<sup>210</sup>

Susan shared that she has many family members that support her and her children if she needs anything, but in spite of this physical support, she says,

Sometimes I do feel like my experiences, even though I have the support and people I can reach out to, I am usually the one that people reach out to and that's a big part of it. When I'm going through something, it's like who can I call? Everybody's calling me with their problems! Then my experiences are unique like the challenges of going through the ministry and trying to find my way in that way; and trying to be a good mother; trying to be a good role model; and all those different things. You know, people who are in my life, my age group, my peers, my family, they don't have that responsibility, so I feel alone some of the times in that. Like who can I talk to about that stuff?

You don't know what it's like to be scrutinized and all of these different things that are going on with you personally. And then on top of that having to still show up to your daughter's practice and show up to lead devotion on Sunday. So, who do I talk to about that? I mean in my peer group. It's multilayers and sometimes I feel like it's multidimensional. When I think about it, I know physically I'm not alone because there are people there I can call you know and people will tell me that. I don't think I've ever said that to anybody that's close to me that I feel alone because people will probably look at me like I'm crazy. "What?" "Alone?" [Thinking of what friends might say] Girl you got family, you got friends." But they wouldn't really get what I mean when I say that, it's more or less alone emotionally.

Likewise, both of Lisa's parents are readily available to provide physical support for her daughter but she feels like she is ultimately responsible for her daughter.

I have my parents here but there are times when I go to bed at night and my brain is just going thinking about what I have to do tomorrow; thinking about what I have to do for her and myself to provide for both of us. So, I have a heavy burden. I feel like I have a heavy burden, even with them.

Juanita also has a supportive family but she makes all of the decisions about her daughter's care.

For the most part, I feel like I'm making decisions alone. Like I try to consult my mom but when it comes to financial things, there's a lot of things that she doesn't know because she didn't go to college. She didn't learn about financial management. So, you know things like financial stuff; she's probably not the best

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<sup>210</sup> Jackson, "Well-Being among Single, Black, Employed Mothers."

person to ask. So, I try to ask my oldest brother because he's into real-estate and he knows some things about financial stuff but for the most part it's me cause it's my money and I gotta find out what to do with it.

McAdoo explains that feeling alone, even with supportive families attests to the instrumental and expressive functions of motherhood. Instrumental roles are those related to basic survival of family members: food, clothing, shelter, and medical care. The expressive functions are those related to the affective domain: the maintenance of emotional support, love, and security.<sup>211</sup>

### *Relational*

Relational themes emerged from the research participants with their children, the fathers of their children, parents, and other friends and family. In my analysis of the transcripts, some of the research participants shared thoughts and feelings about their children's relationship to their fathers and the research participant's relationship with ex-husbands and lovers--for those who remained in contact at some level. For example, Kenya shared,

Not having a companion [and] not having someone to co-parent with you. Whenever I make decisions, I make them on my own. Sometimes it would be nice to have someone to bounce off my decisions on. Like my daughter got suspended last year and I didn't know if it was fair that she got suspended from school because she was struggling with her behavior at school. So, that's an issue, her behavior at school. If I had somebody here to co-parent, I feel like her behavior would be a little bit more balanced and mellow.

She always wants to be the center of attention because you know, I feel like maybe she's not getting enough attention from me. If she had a dad to love her and show her that she's the beautiful black queen and princess that she is, I feel like she would not have to be in class acting up or hitting people or saying things that are inappropriate because she would have a little bit more stability at home. Not that she does not have stability but it's obvious that the male is missing. It's so obvious! I think the greatest challenge is the fact that there is not a male presence to help her be a better girl.

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<sup>211</sup> McAdoo, "Stress Levels, Family Help Patterns, and Religiosity," 154.

Juanita also lamented the fact that her daughter's father is not available to help.

Just because like that fact that her dad is not actively involved. Like there is no down time. Trying to do school and taking care of a child and like attempting to have a social life, is just a lot. And it's not like I can say, "Well this weekend you're going to go to your dad's house." No, you're not going to go to your dad's house this weekend! You've never been to your dad's house since you've been born! It's not going to happen [laughter]! You know, I can't say so "Your dad's going to come pick you up." That's not going to happen!

Erica said it was hard for her because her father was present in her life.

What was hard was I grew up with a father and my kids were not growing up with a father. They did not have a male influence in their lives. They have no father! You know and so it was difficult at that point. I remember somebody told me once there's, you know, there are a lot of moms that had to raise their children as single moms and they named some great men who grew up without a father in their lives. And they turned out to be great men. I can't recall all these names now but I started thinking about that and said [to myself] you have to be mother and father. The kids always wished me happy father's day. You know, and it was difficult and more so because I grew up with a father.

She also had a difficult relationship with her children's father.

We don't have a good relationship! When we talk its not going to go anywhere cause eventually he's gonna say something that's going to really really tick me off. When I talked to him, I used to get so angry. I would get headaches. I would be stressed! I would be crying! I just couldn't do anything after I got off the phone with this man! My girlfriend taught me, she says, "You need to have a conversation with him in the bubble." I say, what is this bubble thing? She says, "You're having this conversation cause you're on the phone. You're having this conversation and he's saying stuff that's really making you angry. You need not to say anything back. You need to say it to him in the bubble. You can say whatever you want to him. You're picturing yourself talking to him in the bubble. You can say whatever you want to him in the bubble because if you say something it's just going to make him madder, and you're never going to get through this conversation, and you're going to be so upset when you're done. It stressed you out. It made your life worse. Do not let this man get to you." So, I talked to him in the bubble. Otherwise, it's going to be uh "Why are you acting like this?" You know its not going to get anywhere.

So, we don't have relationship. We don't and I'm perfectly ok with that. But I wish he would have a relationship with his children. As they were coming up, I never said bad things about him. You know when he didn't show up for stuff, I know something came up and when he did not show up. I'd cover him saying [to the kids], I know something came up. I remember when my daughter, I think she

was 14 or 15. "Mom I tried to call dad but he's just so difficult! He's mad because we don't call him all the time!" I would say. "Well honey you know what your dad is going through a lot of things he's gotta take care of your Grammy." She says, "Mom talk to the hand! I am old enough now! I know what's going on. So, you can hold that! Don't even tell me something like that!" But I still I never wanted to make them dislike their father. I didn't want to be the person who came between them. So, if he ever did try to have a relationship with them, there would be this preconceived idea. The problem is they already have that because they don't hear from him and when they do talk to him, he's fussing at them because they don't call him all the time. So you know we don't have a relationship. I just prefer it but I wish he would try to have a relationship with his kids.

Ann has a tenuous relationship with her eldest daughter's father.

My daughter's father he's there but he's an idiot! His answer to everything is "Give her to me and I'll take care of her." "Give her to me, I'll take care of her." So, whenever I asked him for money, it was like talking to a wall, like a stupid person. His answer to everything, "Give her to me I'll take care of her." It's like if I ask you for \$20 bucks, "Give her to me, I'll take care of her." It was just very very hard for me! Very very hard because it's like I'm working my ass off twice as much for somebody else to be lazy! Had you been doing what you're supposed to be doing. You don't have much but you have to do something! And I'm not that type of mother that's going to be running ... First of all a lot of things that I see in LA, is mothers still have sex with their children's father because that keeps them around. I'm not that type of person! I'm not gonna beg you to do something!

Juanita has a similar tenuous relationship with her daughter's father.

She has a relationship with her father and I don't think it's that good because I grew up seeing my father every day for better or worse. Whenever I saw him whether he got on my nerves that day or not, you know I saw my dad every single day. So to me, I see that as the way it should be. She doesn't see her dad every day. She sees her dad, you know every three four months maybe. Sometimes I call him the birthday dad because he's here for birthdays and lately it's just been me asking him, "Do you want to take her to go bowling, go to the movies?" Trying to include him more because I know she wants to see him. So, I don't see it as being a super good one. I see it as more of her wanting him in her life and him kinda being there when he can. I don't see her as a priority for him. I see him as being, "When I can be there, if I can't then I'm going to be ... I got like whatever to do." You know what I'm saying? I don't see it, as like stable. So I don't think it's too good.

I would like it to be better. Why is he not banging down my door? Like why isn't he calling me like every single day to be like, "Hey what is our daughter doing?" Like you know she's in preschool. Why don't you call like every single day like, "How are you doing?" "How was school?" Like she can talk now? You know,

like I mean you don't have to call her and chop it up for hours. Like call her! I mean like you live an hour away! Hop on the freakin metro and come see her! And its not like I told him, "Oh you can't see her" or nothing like that. I don't even make it difficult for him. You know, I pick him up from the train station when he wants to come out here, you know.

I make it easy because its not about me and him its about her. You know! I don't even talk bad about him to her you know cause I want her to formulate her own opinions of her dad. I'm like dude you have it so easy like I can make your life so difficult if I wanted to but I don't because I want you to see your child. And he doesn't, like he don't call and if he does call, to me it just seems fake. It just seems like you know, "Hey man how's your daughter?" "Oh yeah, my child ... hold on, hold on, [Calling mom] hey how's my daughter?" I don't feel like it's genuine! I just don't feel like it's genuine! I think, and honestly, I don't know what the heck goes through his head. I don't know where he's at sometimes! And I just don't think it's a good relationship. And I don't think he's sincere or he could be and he may just now know how but I would like it to be better. I would like him to be more involved.

### Judged and Stereotyped

Over the course of my conversations with the women, all shared thoughts and feelings about myths and stereotypes directed towards single African American mothers. They described others' perceptions of them: as *"typical statistic"*; *having "no family values"*; *"sexually promiscuous"*; *"baby factories"*; *"expect the worst of my children"*; *"negative"*; *"they think I'm on welfare"*; *"overbearing and mean"*; and *"uneducated and ghetto."* Several research participants described various situations in which they received (real or perceived) racist comments.

Though most of the images reported were negative, many of the research participants seemed to agree that the concept of matriarchy was a true assessment, not only of single African American mothers, but also in their families of origin. More than half of the research participants described their mothers and grandmothers as family pillars. There is also evidence that suggests that the sacrificial and intentional behavior to prove society's stereotypes wrong, and the way many of the mothers overextended

themselves in the interest of children, were indicative of internalizing the characteristics of the *strong black woman* they admired in women caregivers and in their families of origin. Psychotherapist Beverly Green argues that this is a form of internalized racism.

Clinical manifestations of internalized racism may be observed in many forms and are likely to have multiple determinants. The client may harbor the fear that expressing any behavior that is associated with negative stereotypes of African American women proves that the stereotypes are valid. In this case, acting or attempting to act, against or disprove the stereotype may be reflected in the client's inhibition, repression, or emotional construction. This behavior clearly reflects the level of shame the client experiences for characteristic that she believes define her.<sup>212</sup>

All of the research participants held the media responsible for transmitting negative views about single African American mothers. Jewell argues, "The mass media play an important role in maintaining a social hierarchy of discrimination, as they are the chief vehicles by which ideology is transmitted through information and imagery."<sup>213</sup>

Ziegler adds:

The primary functions of the mass media (print, broadcast, cable) are to inform, educate, and persuade the public, to entertain, and to transmit culture. The mass media have also been described as the teacher of postindustrial society. The packaging of a message may create some distortions of a particular culture or ethnic group, resulting in a negative image and belief regarding the culture or ethnic group that is described as a negative process of mass media enculturation.<sup>214</sup>

Susan shared that feeling "scrutinized" was one her biggest challenges.

I've always felt pretty confident in my ability. I remember starting to feel, um what's the word I'm looking for? Just scrutinized! When I would walk in my son's school or even my daughter's school alone by myself, particularly with my daughter because she goes to a creative arts school, [a] very mixed race school,

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<sup>212</sup> Beverly Greene, "African American Women," in *Women of color: integrating ethnic and gender identities in psychotherapy*, ed. Lillian Comas-Díaz and Beverly Greene (New York: Guilford Press, 1994), 20.

<sup>213</sup> K. Sue Jewell, *From mammy to Miss America and beyond: cultural images and the shaping of US social policy* (New York: Routledge, 1993), ix.

<sup>214</sup> Dhyana Ziegler, "Single Parenting: A Visual Analysis," in *African American single mothers: understanding their lives and families*, ed. Bette Dickerson (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995), 86.

[with] a lot of different cultures, [and] a lot of same-sex families, [but] still two parent households though. So, here I come in you know and its like I feel like people are looking at me like, hmm hmm hmm, assuming I'm on welfare or assuming that I don't work or just making assumptions of what I am. Cause I probably look pretty young and younger than what people think.

Juanita feels that public perceptions place single African American mothers into one of two categories.

In society I think it's either one or two. You know you're slutty having babies or you're a single mom who's bitter who don't get no man. It's either one. It's never you're just a good woman with a child just trying to do your thing. It's never that! It's always you're a baby factory or you're a bitter woman. And I think that's how society depicts black women and for the most part it's more the baby factory you know than the hard working bitter woman. You know what I'm saying? It's one or the other but I feel like it's more times the baby factory.

People judge me because I know that I look young. And so people look at me and like they automatically think I'm a teen mom and they kinda like label me as that. And they look at me as not being educated. I don't know, it's like for some reason people look at me and they don't see me as educated. Like when I tell em, they are like "oh" [appalled expression and light laugh]. They're in shock and I'm like why is that you wouldn't expect that? I mean it's because I'm black and they probably think well she's probably got a bunch of other children. I'm not saying it's right [because] that's what it is you know and I mean people look at me like that like um or like they don't think that I have a kid. Like when I'm in the workplace or whatever and I tell them that I'm going to get my Masters and I tell them that I'm 27 and there like, "Wow you're getting your Masters?" And then I tell them I have a kid and they are like, "Wow oh and you have a kid too?" Like it's not possible to, you know, like [laughter] to go to school, have a job and you know, like have a child. Like that's not possible.

Honestly at this point, I think I'm kinda used to it. I kinda expect it. Like I think when I first had my daughter and she was an infant I was kinda like, "um what you mean?" You know like, so, when I first had her, I was offended like, "What are you trying to say?" But you know like four years later, I'm just used to it. Like, I don't even like stop to think about it. Like, "What the heck did that comment mean?" At this point, like the comments have been said and I'm like yeah yeah and I just keep it moving. I'm just so used to dealing with it at this point that I don't even really absorb it. It's just kinda like oh yeah, yeah yeah I have a child. Yeah I work. Yeah I'm single. It's just kinda like that I don't even absorb it any more, I just expect it.

She also became angry when she talked about the media's depiction of single African



American mothers.

The media! Oh gosh [pause of disgust] don't even get me started! I'm a big movie buff and I love watching movies and I watch them and I critique them and I just get so irritated! Like I don't watch BET. I can't do BET! I can't do a lot of black movies. Like I can't because I feel like these women, they're not me you know. It's bullshit! Sorry, it's a bunch of crap and I feel like the media, they just want to sell an idea you know what I'm saying. I think they want to take an idea and they want to blow it up and make it more than what it is, you know. So, I think they pigeonhole black people in general. Then they take the black woman and it's like either we can be a successful woman or we can be the baby factory.

[Thinking of what the media might be saying] Let's take the baby factory cause that's going to sell more. I guess it's more comedic than a woman being successful, you know. Unless she's bitter cause that sells too! I feel like it's pigeon holing people and then selling it like it's real. That's the media! The media just pigeonholes us and they like, you know, um either you're single, you know you're young, it's like you have to fit a certain criteria. I don't know it's like they are pigeonholing us like your single [and] black then you're probably young with a bunch of kids and you don't got no daddy. And you know it's like I have a father but I'm a single mother. I just feel like the media pigeonholes you and they tell you that's who you are and everything else is not real. And I feel like its more marketable like they want you to see yourself and you end up internalizing that unless you know you look at it like that just a bunch a crap!

Sylvia is aware that as a single African American mother, her sons are expected to die young or go to prison.

Yeah, we get a bad rap cause by me being a single parent; I should either be at the graveyard visiting somebody or in the jailhouse visiting somebody. You know because I am single parent and the statistics show that the kids ain't going to grow up to be nothing and they gonna be in trouble and all this. You know in society when they see my kids, and I tell my sons this all the time, you already have two strikes against you. You are black and you male. So one of the things that you need to do is make sure you always keep yourself straight.

She also became angry when she shared her thoughts about how the media focuses on the negative events about Black people.

I can't stand the media! They only show the negative side! It's unfortunate yes our culture has a lot more. I won't even say that. So our culture has just as much stuff going on as other cultures but it's only us that they show. You know, that's what created the stereotypes. Um, you see a young black man walking down the street, clutch your purse because that's what they show you on TV you know. The

media is not our friend! Now when other cultures do something, the same stuff that we do, you're not gone see their pictures plastered all over the news. That's how you can tell who committed what kind of crime on the news. If it's a certain crime, if it's a black person that committed it, you're gone see the mug shot back when they went to jail the first time, third time, whatever. If a white person committed it, you never see their picture on the news. They'll just capture them and this is the story that happened. They ain't gone show the picture or nothing. Very rarely will they show white people on the news that done committed a crime. The crimes that our kids are committing, they show all our kids. Ain't this her child? Or, no they are all our kids and they don't show on the news. They doing far worst stuff then what we doing but all they gonna see is us on the news; only gonna read about us in the paper! You now, I'm assuming that's what sells papers.

Lisa says that single African American mothers are considered sexually promiscuous and lacking family values.

They perceive us poorly! I believe that they see us as sexually promiscuous as people who don't have family values. Those are the two main things promiscuous and not having values. Not valuing family values! And it's farthest from the truth. Totally, farthest from the truth! I know that is not my story and that's not the story of many of my girlfriends. I have other girlfriends who are single parents, prayed to Jesus all day and night for a husband and for whatever reason found themselves in that place of being a single parent and are still very conservative. More conservative than I am! But I hear it all the time!

Kenya expressed some shame for being perceived as a "statistic."

Just a typical statistic! And I think now that there are so many single moms that it's kinda like the status quo. Well she's a single mom and there's nothing new about that. It's happening so often, but then at the same time I think people are like wow they are not shocked by that. I'm not married you know. If they see me, I think people aren't shocked by that. First of all, I'm black. I'm a black female and I have a little child with me so it's not a shocker. I think people now just kind of assume, it's just the norm especially since you are black. There's no surprise there.

You know I never wanted to be a statistic I guess and even though I made comments before about becoming a single black mom, I mean really, I never wanna to make my race look any worse. It's funny that you ask that, "How does that make me feel?" Cause I was asking my daughter. She was on the radio the other day playing this game and the guy says, "Oh it sounds like you don't have a father" or something, she made a comment. And so how does that make me feel? It's kind of just whatever. It's a part of my life. I embrace it, and I embrace it. When I say embrace it, cause it's like it's something that I own you know it's who

I am. I'm not going to feel any worse about it. I have to move on with my life but it's not something that I go preaching to the world that I'm a single mother.

### Coping with Challenges and Stereotypes

Three superordinate themes described how the research participants cope or coped with the challenges and with the stereotypes of being single mothers: *resources, strength and independence, and self-sacrifice and overcompensating.*

#### *Resources*

Most of the research participants have physical support from families. Some of the research participants had and have supportive parents, siblings, and baby sitters. Others have or had the emotional support of long-time friends. Revisionist research has documented several strategies used by single African American mothers to survive and cope with the demands of single parenting. Of all the resources described, family, kin, and fictive kin networks or relationships with people who are unrelated by birth or marriage, is a significant resource. This is consistent with the findings in this study as a majority of the research participants have supportive family and friends.

Erica, Juanita, Kenya, Kim, Lisa, Susan, and Sylvia all described having some level of family support. The sub-theme of strength and independence also emerged as a coping resource. Juanita describes the physical support she receives from her mother and brother.

I have a good support system with my family. Like my mom helps me out a lot. My brother he helps me out a lot and they're really good about, you know. The one in the middle, he's really good, you know. Like he doesn't have any kids and my daughter just loves him! She just loves him! So, if I wanted to go out with my friends, I'd be like, "Hey are you doing anything tonight?" And he'd be like, "[sigh] What do you want [laughter]?" And I'd be like "Well can you just watch Mary for a couple of hours?" He's really good about doing it. Like they're really helpful. Like my mom, when she doesn't work, she's a nurse, so she has every other weekend off. She's good about it, that helps a lot.

Kenya also relies on the support of her parents and a babysitter that provides physical and emotional support for her daughter.

My babysitter, she's like a nanny. She's like my daughter's second mom. She's been around for three years. If I didn't have her, I wouldn't be able to go to class. She's a big help because she's very loving towards my daughter and she always keeps me in the loop of what's going on with her emotions and stuff like that. So, she's a big help. And then of course friends and family, [and] my sorority sisters are always willing to watch Lucy and help out. My mom and dad also play a key role because when my daughter was almost gettin suspended from school, my dad called her. And I was so frustrated! I sent my mom a text I'm like, "Oh my God, I'm so done with her! Can you please come pick her up now?" Cause every summer she spends about a month with my mom. At the time, I told my mom that I was so done with Lucy that I didn't know what to do with her. I'm like, "I'm so done with Lucy I don't know what to do with her!" So, my dad called and talked to my daughter and I appreciated that because obviously she doesn't have a dad. So, he was like being the dad in that case and calling asking her, "What's going on?" You know he just wanted to hear from her to see why she was misbehaving. And I appreciated that because my dad has never needed to do that, I guess before, but when he called, I was like, "Thank you so much!" "Thank you for being that male voice that she needs right now!"

Lisa's mother and father are surrogate parents to her daughter.

My mother and father are a um, they're kind of surrogate parents in a lot of ways. They do so much for me. I don't think I could've done this without them. My mother feeds her every morning. Let's see, we kinda like have an assembly line. My mother feeds her, I get her ready for school, my dad reads to her right before school, then I take her to school. So, they're my family support system.

Sylvia's family helped her "raise" her children. "God blessed me with a family that if I couldn't do it, my mom or my sister stepped in to help. So me an my family raised these kids."

### *Strength and Independence*

Strength and independence were additional coping and survival resources for many of the research percipients. Most described their grandmothers and mothers as models of strength and independence. Dowd explains that single African American

mothers are often models of independence and strength, and as indicative of African American women in general, some are self-reliant, self-confident, and see themselves as autonomous and independent.<sup>215</sup>

Ann coped with the challenges of single parenting by relying on herself. She does not trust people and prefers to do everything alone.

Most of the people say that I'm going to implode [laugh] because I don't [express my feelings]. It was, I felt like as far as family goes, that I feel like I can't depend on any of them. So, they pretty much depend on me. If someone needs money, they ask me. If someone needs a ride, they call me. So as far as resources, the main thing was just money. And in all honesty, it was money and doing it for myself because I really felt like I could not rely on a soul. Not one person, period! Not a significant other! And also for a long time I didn't date, so I had a lot of time on my hands. In all that time, I was able to focus on them because I wasn't dating. I didn't have a significant other you know there. I didn't have anybody to help me. When somebody needed something, I mean I had to go out and get it. When the children needed to be picked up, I had to pick em up.

Dorothy coped alone because she was not comfortable sharing her feelings with anyone, other than lovers in short-term relationships.

My grandmother would help me out if I asked but I didn't like to ask because asking meant I had to explain, "why" and I didn't like that because I did not want her to hear what I wasn't doing. I was close to my mom to a certain degree, you know I would not share, really share issues. I would say any issues I may have had at the time or unhappiness, the only resources would probably be whoever I would be in relationship at the time because I really didn't have, you know like, now I have a best friend. You know [I had] a few best friends. I probably would share or talk to about things. I didn't have a spiritual person. See, I didn't trust anyone enough to share my deepest feelings and whatever was going on right now in my relationship. It was the person that I was with was it. I would be unhappy or lonely for a minute, but then I would be in another one. So, I didn't have anybody that I was close to that I shared anything like that.

All of the women described their mothers and grandmothers as "strong" and "independent." Several research participants stated that they learned how to be strong from their mothers and grandmothers. Ann takes pride in her ability to use her strength to

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<sup>215</sup> Dowd, *In defense of single-parent families*, 105.

manage the demands of single parenting.

We're depicted as these strong people but we have to be! I don't want to be strong but I have to be because we don't want to be freaking weak! The first thing that you hear a man say about a black woman, "Oh she's strong!" That's not the first thing I want you to say about us! We're intelligent! You get what I'm saying? And its not so much that you know we are not strong but that also seems like we're physically strong like our features are strong you know what I'm saying? We are more than freaking strong! When I do hear, "oh she's strong, yeah she's strong" That's cause we have to be strong! And I think that we are critical thinkers. I think that we know how to juggle and maneuver and be resilient in a place where you know a lot of people have to be something else.

Lisa observed strength and independence in her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother.

From my own personal observations, my mother, although less educated than my father, was the stronger parent. My grandmother was the strong parent in her marriage. These were both women who were married for years. My great-grandmother was the strongest in the family, so I observed women be strong. In our society the black family is really what is it, matriarchy. We are a matriarchy society. That is one of my theories and whether it is by circumstance or choice, we embrace that adjective, that ability to nurture our families. I see this modeled in my family.

Dorothy is independent because she learned from her mother and grandmother. "My grandmother was my primary influence. That's probably why I was so independent because I watched her do that because she took care of everything and everybody. So her, I have to say her that's where I get that from."

### *Self-Sacrifice and Overcompensating*

Susan says:

Sometimes I feel like I overcompensate because I want them to see that I am a good parent. And I want them to see that my son, even though he was raised by his mom, is a very good boy. So I feel like, sometimes I feel like I am over like trying to you know, especially when I'm dealing with you know, other races. Its like because as black women, even without being a parent, you already have this rap about you and now you have these children that you have two different fathers and you're not married and all these different things.

Ann feels the sacrifices she made for her children were to their detriment.

Right now with my son, our relationship is kinda strained. We have our ups and downs almost daily! Almost daily because it's kinda like, and this is where I thought I was doing the right thing, but I realized that I wasn't. I removed all of their obstacles. So every type of burden I put it on me. So it was times when I was with my mother and our electricity is going to get cut off. That was never an issue with us. We have never worried about food; always there before you could even it run out. It always there! So whenever they needed money, always there! Whenever they needed something like clothes, it's always there! It's like all the things that taught me how to think for myself and to understand things and you know to figure out stuff, I felt maybe I was a little overbearing and thinking that I could do it all for them and they would understand it. But I'm now learning that my son and my daughter [are] a little spoiled because I sacrificed.

### Trauma, Loss, and Abandonment

Relational trauma is an unfortunate superordinate theme, yielding subthemes of interpersonal violence, abandonment, and loss of hopes, dreams and expectations that, at some level, the children's fathers would be involved in their children's lives. At minimum, they hoped that the children would have a relationship with their fathers as some of them experienced. This sense of loss was couched in feelings and unanswered questions of how a man, who helped conceive a child, could completely abandon their child.

### *History of Interpersonal Violence*

Sylvia, Susan, Pam, and Kim shared the painful agony of interpersonal violence in relationships with their children's fathers. Sylvia shared that while she endured several episodes of physical abuse, the mental and verbal abuse she experienced was the most damaging because she blamed herself for the abuse, like many women in abusive relationships.

Yes a lot of physical probably two or three and I was like don't sleep here tonight. I got tired of that! You can't sleep here! You need to find somewhere to sleep cause I can't be responsible for what might happen. So he had to leave!

Um more mental more verbal. You know, and to me those two are more damaging than the physical. You can heal past the physical, but if you supposed to be in a relationship with someone and they never tell you nothing positive or your beautiful and they just always just run you down, that stuff embeds itself in your brain you know. And all the years when we were together, he had the first affair, I was like maybe I did something wrong and then every year he kept having and having. Wait a minute it ain't me, it's you! I then finally figured out that there is nothing I've done or am doing cause all I am doing is taking care of the kids, taking care of the house and working. You know so that type of abuse yeah I've been through that.

Susan described many experiences of physical abuse by her son's father and experiences of emotional abuse by her daughter's father.

My son's father was very abusive! I mean, I've had broken bones and I've had black eyes. I was young and the last thing I remember was he ran me over with a car and um the only thing that really saved me was I was on a bike and I kinda had the bike in front of me. So he ran in to me and he kinda ran into the bike and I fell on top of the car. I still have scars today now on my legs from that incident with pedals, the metal things that stick out of the pedals that got stuck to my legs. But oh man, oh god yeah, I have horror stories, just about the fighting with him. My daughter's father um never physical but just emotional, never physical, never verbal he's not that kind of guy, emotional definitely.

Erica's abusive marriage escalated to the point where she was hospitalized.

I was in a domestic violence type of marriage with abuse and that was hard. When I finally realized this is not going to work, that's a whole nother situation too. Like I did end up in the hospital. They ended up taking him to jail but it was only overnight then we got divorced. He divorced me because he did not want to go to domestic violence treatment and counseling and all that kind of stuff. The judge said [to him] that if he divorced me, for the restraining order, he would not have to go all the classes. The first time I got hit, [I was] six months pregnant with my daughter and it progressively gets worse and each time I was, oh my god! Oh my god!

Pam described her physically abusive marriage and a traumatic episode with her ex-husband that continues to linger in the lives of both of her children.

He was physically abusive during our marriage. After we divorced, I actually took a trip to see his mother. When we were there um his mom told him that we were coming and to come. So, he showed up with his girlfriend at that time and her kids that were calling him daddy and it was a very emotional scene. When we got



ready to go, he um he tried to take my son and so that really left him with a scar. Physically he grabbed him and he started blaming me you know. Like he's holding our son and won't let him go and um saying all this stuff like, "Your mom doesn't want to let you see me." You know, just throwing darts at my heart, you know. Using the kids and it was really a traumatic scene because his mom, his sister, his older sister, his girlfriend, him and me. They tried to take my kids! They tried to take my kids!

Sometimes I feel like we never really healed from that because you know I've done therapy and all of that and you know and the kids they haven't really dug into their stuff. They're not ready! So its been tough and that was a traumatic situation just getting out of there because you know, just yeah, they were going to take my kids! And I was about to call 911 because he had my son and I couldn't take him because had I done that, it woulda been a big you know, really at that moment it was God that was guiding me because I could've ended up in jail.

And his girlfriend just got in my face [saying] "Why can't they go with us?" All that drama you know and I didn't react to it other than I knew I had to get outta of there. I mean, I was reacting, but I didn't go to a place where I coulda ended up in jail because when someone tries to hurt your children, you know, you can turn psycho you know and my focus was to get out of there. And when my son looked at me, when he was in his dad's arms and I was saying, "David [the father] just let him go, let him go!" And I started calling 911 and his mom asked me, "What are you doing?" I said, "I'm calling the police!" And she begged her son to let my son go and David reached out to me, my son, at what eight years old said, "Mom don't leave me!" I think at that point, my son, made a choice.

#### *Loss of Relationship, Hopes, and Dreams, Divorce, and Separation*

Another prevalent superordinate theme amongst the research participants was issues of loss. Loss in this sense includes the obvious loss of the physical, financial, emotional and spiritual support of their children's fathers, along with the loss of expectations, dreams, and hopes for the research participant's lives and the lives of their children. Those who married hoped they would stay married and keep their families intact. Others, who had their children outside of marriage, expected that their children's fathers would be involved in some capacity to help with their children.

Susan described the loss of family and wanting her family to stay intact, so much that she held on to the relationship in spite of the abuse and infidelity until she realized

her family dream had dissolved.

When I finally came to the realization that we just were not going to get back together, you know cause I wanted a family the husband the wife and the kids. That's what I wanted but it just wasn't working with this person and when I come to the realization of that, I cried three four days straight. Then I just asked God, ok God I got these kids and if you don't send me somebody else to help me raise these kids, I got to raise these kids and I need your help! He never sent me anybody. While I was raising kids, I didn't date that's one thing I did not do, I didn't date. I didn't bring people around my kids [and] I didn't go and meet people nowhere. It was just me and my kids.

Lisa described her frustrations of wanting her daughter to have a relationship with her father, as she did.

I think her dad not being a constant presence in her life bothers [frustration] me. But I have my dad who she knows as "papa" and she used the word "papa" before she called me "mommy" and grandma, "grammy," So, they're very close. She still has that father figure. She has a male presence. I consider my dad her dad in many ways cause he's the one who reads to her and does all those things. I look at little girls with their fathers and I want that for my daughter and also I recognize that the ideal situation is a two-parent home but I don't want to be in a two parent home where it is mentally abusive and mentally draining. That would not be fair for me or her.

Juanita stated that she expected that as long as she waited for that special someone and stayed faithful and committed, she and her boyfriend would remain together.

I guess for me because I did not expect that to happen. I thought that if you know you stayed pure, and whatever, you find that one you're supposed be with, you know that's how it's supposed to be. You know and there was no outside. You know like, I always thought that if you were a good person, and you don't go outside, then the person wouldn't do that to you.

Just because like that fact that her dad is not actively involved. Like there is no, you know what I'm saying, there's no down time. Trying to do school and taking care of a child and like attempting to have a social life is just a lot! And it's not like I can say, "Well this weekend you're going to go to your dad's house." No, you're not going to go to your dad's house this weekend! You've never been to your dad's house since you've been born; it's not going to happen! You know, I can't say so, "Your dads going to come pick you up." That's not going to happen, those things don't happen! You know I'm doing school and there's no one to help me. And even, like even though were not together, it's like he coulda been like, "This weekend I got you" or "You know, you got a final coming up, cool, I'll

come pick her up.” Something like, just anything like, there wasn’t that, there’s none of that.

Erica wanted her children to have the benefit of two parents, as she experienced with her parents. Although she feels she has done a good job with her children, she regrets marrying a man who abandoned her children.

I couldn’t believe that I was in this situation with my kids and they didn’t have a father in their life and one that did not care! Even worse, you think that your marrying the right person and he did not even care! I look at my brother and his wife and his kids and he’s mister mom and dad. He is always there for his kids. They look up to him just like we did our dad and it’s like I can’t really do that male thing. I can’t really offer that, so I’m a parent but I’m not the family that they really needed! I always felt like, I’m not the family cause the father’s not there.

Sylvia became sad and tearful when she described that her dream of a family not only ended in a painful divorce, but her ex-husband completely abandoned their children.

“Growing up I remembered I had my best friend you know, we were always talking about the family we were going to have. Um, I always wanted kids, I wanted to get married to the perfect man and um and you know, just have the perfect life. She describes how she and her children responded when he abandoned the family. The children asked,

“Mom what happened? Where’s my daddy?” I just went into a serious depression and I felt like why? I needed help with them! I went to my mom, you know, for help and I moved from where we were which was a really uh step backwards you know...and I knew it once I made the move hmmm [sigh] “Why did I do this?” Because um you know, my mom and I you know, we need our own space. But again in my mind, my psyche was just you know, messed up because I was dealing with the abandonment of you know, anger, resentment, bitterness just all of it you know, embarrassment.

It was not explicitly expressed by the research participants, however the implicit expressions of loss and the absence of opportunities to grieve those losses were evident in the research participants’ descriptions of divorce and relationship breakups, their frustrations with securing financial support from their children’s fathers, the expressions

of loss in relationships with their own mothers and fathers, and loss articulated in the inability to comprehend why the fathers of their children were absent or refused to take an active part in their children's lives. I found that the research participants had not grieved their losses. According to Doka, they have not been accorded the "right to grieve." That is, the pain from the losses they have incurred because of divorce, affairs, or short-term relationships, cannot be openly acknowledged, socially validated or publicly observed.

Six of the research participants had relationships with men outside of marriage. One research participant became a single mother when she became pregnant during an affair with a married man. One research participant became pregnant in a "friends with benefits" relationship. The remaining five were in short-term or cohabitating relationships with their children's fathers before becoming pregnant. These nontraditional relationships have tenuous public acceptance and limited legal standing, and they face negative sanction within the larger community and in the church.<sup>216</sup> Four of the divorced research participants expressed painful emotions when they described the circumstances that led to the divorce and their post-divorce pain caused by custody arrangements, child support, and yearning for the fathers to maintain relationships with their children.

Divorce grief can be compared to grief resulting from death of a spouse because both forms of loss have some measure of finality for the survivor, the need to make decisions about life in the absence of the deceased loved one, and both require an identity shift from the self as part of a couple relationship. Divorce grief is a response to the death of a marital relationship that includes relinquishing the dream of happily ever after, accepting new roles, adjusting to changes in finances, loss of property or living

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<sup>216</sup> Doka, *Disenfranchised grief*, 11.

arrangement, reestablishing physical and emotional intimacy, and preserving the self.<sup>217</sup>

Martin argues that divorce grief is more complicated than death grief because divorce intensifies grief because of the individual's response to the divorce and a person's environmental response to the divorcing individual. This grief is disenfranchised at the family and institutional levels. Significantly, most churches do not ritualize losses other than the death of a family member.

### Self-Evaluation

The research participants' candidness and openness in evaluating themselves as mothers emerged in the superordinate theme of self-evaluation. Some of the mothers want to improve their parenting skills. Others, who reflected back on the experience, described some things they would have done better. Still, others were clear about changing their parenting practices from what they had experienced when growing up with their mothers. This included more nurturing and education about life and relationships. Several of the research participants expressed remorse by overcompensating for absent fathers and spoiling their children to the point where they felt unappreciated for the sacrifices they made. In spite of overcompensating or spoiling the children, some of the research participants believe they are doing or did this because it will help them survive as adults. All believed that they were doing a good job or had done a good job.

Pam's daughter is in college and her son is struggling to finish high school. She says,

I mean I feel like I've done my best in parenting them with what I've had to work with. And I have to not be so hard on myself and not be so hard on them either. [I have] to let them find their way and not keep repeating the same thing over.

Sylvia's daughter is in graduate school, one son is in graduate school, and one son

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<sup>217</sup> Terry L. Martin, "Disenfranchised Grief and Divorce," in *Disenfranchised grief: recognizing hidden sorrow*, ed. Kenneth J. Doka (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989), 168-69.

has had some legal troubles. She says, "I'm not saying that I've done everything right but I did ask God to help me raise them and he did promise me that they were going to be ok even though it looked like they wasn't, they are still going to be ok."

Erica's daughter is a college graduate and she lives in another state. Her son is finishing college. She feels like she's done a "good job" while comparing herself to her parents and married brother.

You know what? Now I feel like I've done a good job. Coming up I was always questioning it. How am I doing a good job? I can't be with my kids. I'm working! oh my god, you know! My mom was home. My kids needed somebody to be there to let them in the house. They never went to school close enough to walk home, that type of thing until they lived here but they were older in high school. Yeah you should be able to walk home that's a good thing but I always felt like I'm not doing enough. Then when I start hearing the things my daughter was saying, "Mom you know thank you so much I'm just so proud you're my mom." Or my son to say things about me that are so positive.

Ann loves being a mother, but while looking back on her children's early years, she said,

I would have done different because once I said I'm a mother and I became conscious and I say when I became conscious because again I felt that I was there but and I was kinda like existing. I thought I was doing the right thing but I realized that I wasn't. I removed all of their obstacles. So every type of burden I put it on me, and thinking that I could do it all for them and they would understand it. But I'm now learning that my son and my daughter [are] spoiled little brats and I created that monster because I always thought that they would appreciate everything that I was doing, working my ass off. So there are a lot of things that I did that[are] probably going to be bad. Like I said, [with] relationships, they don't know anyone I've been in relationship with. I was just with them. Of course, I dated but they never saw any of those people. [I told the people I dated] You cannot meet any of my children at all.

Dorothy also reflected back on her daughter's formative years. She learned to balance her role as mother and friend.

So um I just learned that, one I could not be her friend to be her mother, but at the same time, we are also friends. And I think, like said, I think she can say what whatever she wants to say to me. And I think for the most part, um [she] just about almost tells me almost everything. Not everything, but I kinda learned also to um step back and not be as critical or even what was the word I want to say?

As negative or not complaining. What's the word I want to say? Um its not degrading. I've been more supportive, just put it like that. I've been more supportive of her than my mother.

Juanita is intentionally making changes as a mother.

I think it's different. I think with my mom, I think like and its hard to tell cause my daughter is so young you know. But um it seems like when we were kids, you know, my mom wasn't playful she just seemed like just a bit, um strict. I think I'm strict with my daughter like in another way. Like I think my mom was strict with us like, "This is how girls dress" and "This is what girls do." I'm like more strict with my daughter in like you gotta work on these manners and you gotta get your education. I think it's different in that sense. I do see that a lot of things like I do differently like we got whipped a lot. I felt like, I try not to do that. I feel like I try to use my words and tell her you know, your about to be on time out or you need to bring yourself down. You know, I really try to reframe from, like I try not to, because I know when I got whipped, it was like "Why did you whip me?" Like I didn't even get a chance to like explain you know so I found myself trying to let my daughter have her say you know. And I tell her like, well like that's great and I'm like so you know that's it. So I see that difference with me and my mom and I feel like my mom was like, "This is it! [mimicking getting spanked]"

I'm more like this is how it is and I try to talk with her more. So I see that um being the difference. Like I'm not really for the spanking you know I try to avoid that more and um I feel like we kind of got like .... Like my parents would not let me wear pants. Like I didn't grow up wearing pants, which is, why for me I only wear sweats to work out. I don't feel comfortable wearing pants so there are a lot of things that I wanted to do as a child. You can't do that cause you can't wear those kinds of outfits and I wanted to dance and I couldn't do those things because you had to wear long dresses like this [using her hands to describe the dress].

I feel like with my daughter, I'm willing to let her explore more and do whatever. Like I still don't do the pants just because I just think that girls look cute in dresses. That's just me and I know that comes from the fact that I still wear dresses now but you know um like I'm not going to stop her from being a cheerleader or like I'm not going to stop her from being in dance whatever she wants. I'm like whatever you want to do, you know like I just want to support. You know do you. I just feel like I kinda was hindered from doing that so you know I feel like those are those are the differences.

Kenya is also working on being a better parent and she is creating a more nurturing relationship with her daughter, which is different than the relationship she yearned for with her mother.

You know I think I have a pretty good relationship with my daughter. She's still young. She still kinda clingy. She wants to sleep in my bed and says, "I love you mom" and always wants to be up under me. Um and so that's good you know. Um sometimes she'll get these attitudes like, I'm like "Whew you're not grown!" So I think it's a hard balance and some people when they look at me and think that we are friends and I'm like what gives you the impression that I allow my daughter to not respect me in that way? So I think we have a good relationship. She respects me you know um [and] she knows that obviously there's a difference between mother and friend and mother and daughter. Um but I have a lot of growth to do as a parent so much! My gosh!

My parents were always strict and very kind of protective and I was very sheltered as a child and as the only girl like I couldn't do anything you know. I couldn't talk to boys on the phone. We were always in church like three times a week. So everything was centered around church. And so as far as listening to secular music, I couldn't do, like there were some songs they would let me listen to on the radio, but I had no kind of worldly experience and so it was all a one track thing. God was it!

And so that was kind of difficult because I would sneak and do stuff when I got older, behind their backs and I knew that they did not want me, like having a boyfriend for instance. When I was sixteen, when I was younger, my dad used to say, "Ok when you turn sixteen, I'll consider it." So when I turned sixteen, I couldn't, I couldn't do anything, I couldn't date, nothing so I snuck a boyfriend when I was a senior in high school but I was already seventeen at that time. When they found out, it was like the end of the world. But so my parents, my mom was just very strict never really talked about sex um it was just don't do it.

Um you know, I would spend time with my mom but it would be all of us spending time together most of the time um so we didn't have a really close relationship that I hoped we would. And I remember when I started my period, my mom was traveling or something and I was with my dad and my brothers. I was so angry with her she wasn't there, I had started with out her and I was like [growl-squeal] "Oh my God you're not here I'm with my dad and I don't know what to do!" So, I never forget that. I'll never forget her not being there but it's not her fault that she wasn't there.

But um so like with my daughter, I just want her to always know I'm there for her and it's just me and her. So we are always together you know, there is nothing that I miss out on because I always know what's going on with her. But at the same time, I don't want to completely shelter her, so I allow her to listen to secular music, not curse words or stuff like that. I allow her the ability to watch certain, like she can watch PG13 if I'm sitting with her you know and she's seven.

I don't want her to be so sheltered that she does not understand what life is all about, you know? It's a huge world and you can't only be thinking about God.



You need to be thinking about how to reach people who need God and you need to know their world in order to do so. We have a very open communication, open relationship. Sometimes she's in my business a little too much. Too much involved in my world but I'd rather her be able to see things and be able to understand them and not be so sheltered.

### Experiences of God, Religion and Church

All of the research participants use spiritual resources to cope with the challenges of single parenting. Some found that support in church, others cultivated their own relationship with God, and some prefer to call themselves spiritual (as compared to religious). Some of the research participants did not go to church because of negative experiences, or they felt that church participation was not necessary, or they found comfort in their personal relationship with God. Sylvia, Erica, Kenya, Lisa, Pam, Susan, and Kim are members of black churches.

#### *God*

Susan said prayer helps her cope: "a lot of prayer... a lot of prayer [laughter]. I don't know how I could do it with out it." Sylvia's faith also helped her survive her abusive marriage. "It kept me from killing him! My faith and trust in and belief in God, it helped tremendously." Pam relied on "my faith, reading the Bible, reading different sacred texts that give me that inspiration to keep going not to give up." Kim did not go to church during her children's formative years but she said, "I always prayed and asked God to protect my children." Ann, Juanita, and Dorothy have gone to church but now they consider themselves to be spiritual. Ann shared that after bad experiences in church, she developed her own relationship with God; she feels God helps her make decisions and dictates her behavior.

How can I be better and then you get discouraged or I got discouraged. Ok you're at this church and you find out that the pastor has all of these women and you're

like well I'm not really understanding. So my church life is more of, I'm glad that I have an understanding that I don't need church. I need God but I don't need a church. I can do the things that you know ... People need clarification and I really feel like some people interpret some ways you know if its in the wrong hands and to the wrong mind, it can mess up people.

So, I feel that you need it but I feel that you need God more. You know some people, can get off the drugs and some people need constant reassurance with the meetings and stuff like that and I believe that. I'm one of those people that can take something and run with it and have a full understanding of what exactly it means for my life cause if I don't, I'm gone be mad. I'm gone be in church and be mad cause I don't have nice heels on, or nice that on.

So later on, I just started talking to him, just me and him without any type of preacher you know. The main part is I just felt as long as I know what I'm doing bad. I know how to be bad and I know how to be good. I always have this voice telling me you need to be doing good even when you don't want to do something or even when you feel like someone is using you just do what you're supposed to do and everything is gonna be alright. And ever since then, no lie, even though I don't go to church, as long as I feel like I have him in my head kinda guiding me to do what I need to do, I've always been ok. I've always had things work out so as far as resources, God has been able to lead me through the right path.

After exploring Christianity and Islam, Juanita no longer follows a particular religion.

She is more comfortable calling herself spiritual.

I don't subscribe to any one organized religion and I've been to church. I tried out Islam and for the longest time, I was like an active Muslim. I've prayed and I would go to mosque and like and that was really good especially when he and I broke up. I think I just liked going to hear the words you know it was like just uplifting. You know after a while, I just feel like, you know, ok. I felt like I was trying to be something that I wasn't and to me it just seems like when it comes to like trying to follow any one organized religion, it was me trying to be this or trying to be that. I didn't really feel like I fit into any of the categories you know. When I talk about being more spiritual, I do feel like there's like something guiding me so that's how I feel. I do feel like the voices I hear are like my little guardians that keep me on the straight. There's sometimes I probably should go do that and its like no you really shouldn't do that. And it kinda keeps me good, it kinda keeps me on the right path and so that's just like where I'm at.

### *Church*

Some acknowledged that attending church was a challenge because they felt judged or invisible. Juanita felt disrespected for being a single mother in the church

communities she joined.

I think the problem with our society is that we need labels. Our society likes to label people. You gotta be something you know its like well if you're nothing that's what are you. You have to be something and I think like it doesn't matter what part of a religious community you're in. As a single parent or a single woman, I think you get more respect if you're a widow because your not single. It's because your husband died, not because you're like tramping around. I don't think people could think that you know, "I was in a relationship and you know we broke up." You know what I'm saying? I feel like people look down on you unless you're either married or divorced or widowed. I think if you are a single woman and you have a child, I think people look down on you. I don't know, I just feel like that's the sense that I've gotten in religious communities.

Sylvia shared that even though she did not feel welcomed by some of the members in her congregation, she kept going.

In the church, oh god, me and the kids actually did get a bad rap when we first started going to the church that we attend now! As a single mom, it was almost like you know, they would treat you like you had the plague. So, when I went to church, I was still married but they all they see is this lady comin in here with these four kids. We went through a lot because they didn't want their kids to play with my kids or like I wanted somebody's husband or something. It made their skin crawl to see me come. You've done everything and said everything to try to run me away. I kept coming cause you the one squirming not me. You know I'm looking for Jesus, if I look at you and I can't see him, I'll go on to the next. And that's how I played the church. And for probably the first two years, me and my kids went through a whole lot at church, but we kept coming.

Ann had a similar experience but, unlike Sylvia, she stopped attending church after she broke up with her boyfriend.

I eventually had a boyfriend, he went to church, and so I started to like church even though my mind would be thinking about a billion things while I'm in church. So I tried to go to church um and then I realized that once we broke up, I tried to continue to go to church. Well that did not work out very well for me because I realized that, the women did not like me. They would act completely mean towards me in church--like look me up and down. I mean it was fine when I was with him. It wasn't so bad. I would get bad looks or whatever but the women just seemed like they were really really mean.

And that's pretty much my church experience. Maybe it could have been better had I reached out to them more but I didn't grow up in church period. I don't have an extensive background in church but when I did, I felt as though people were

very mean or they were there for show or they were there to make you feel bad about your life and sometimes it wasn't even intentional but the church's here, people were all dressed up and they had their hats and they had their Benzes and I'm here to learn about the word.

Kenya also values her home church but she admitted that her pastor's sermons about marriage are not relevant for her and the many single African American women and mothers who fill the pews each Sunday.

Church is weird. I feel like we're a sore thumb in church and I guess we do and we don't feel welcomed because in church. Most of my church is comprised of single mothers. But at the same time, all of the sermons are geared towards married couples. Like whenever my pastor gives innuendos not innuendos but uh what am I looking for? Stories? What's another word for ...? Like illustrations? I can't think of the word, but whenever he's preaching from the pulpit and gives stories about marriage, everything is centered around his own marriage so all the single women are like, "Dang, well we can't really relate to that!" But we can kinda put in a capsule and use it for later. So, that's what I do! Whenever he's preaching, he always talks about marriage in a sermon. So I just save that for later. But it gets hard because I don't want to hear you preaching about marriage because I'm not married and half the women in this church aren't married Black churches are what 60 to 75% female or something? It's a real high number! I don't know the exact number. So, it's kind of difficult being a single mom in church.

Dorothy, like Juanita, considers herself more spiritual than religious. She noted that being lesbian also affects her experience of the church. She was raised in church and enjoyed the Lutheran school she attended during her adolescent years. She told me she feels guilty because she did take her daughter to church. For the most part, she feels that churches are phony and she has not found a church where she is comfortable.

I was raised in a Methodist church and went to church every Sunday and Sunday school, be rain sleet or snow, sick or not. I went to Lutheran school from seventh to tenth grade. I was confirmed as a Lutheran in the 8th grade. That was the most extensive learning I had for the Bible and Catechism ... I knew that stuff back and forth because we were in class for two years. I was very into it by the time I was in middle school. I loved my Lutheran school. I loved going to the Lutheran church.

Now I consider myself more spiritual than anything. I don't like to go to

traditional churches because I think they are phony. Because of it, I stayed away from it. I felt guilty about it for a long time because my family was always in the church. My sister was in to the church and I always felt like I was supposed to be I tried going to churches. I tried going to Fred Prices church at one time. I've tried different churches. I've gone to evangelist and I've not found a church that I've felt completely comfortable in. I believe that there is something greater than me. I'm open. I don't have strong strong feelings but I go through periods where I feel spiritual so I would not say that I am religious. I don't believe in the traditional church that I was raised in and I have issues because of the church and their feelings of gay people.

Lisa recently attended a Bible study that taught her about relationships in a way that she had not learned previously in church. She said that if she had this information earlier in her life, she would have made different relationship choices.

I felt that my parents were parenting. They did a great job! I was in church all the time. Opened it and closed it but I don't believe the pastors taught. They screamed they preached but I didn't learn about Adam and Eve and what Adam said that Eve did and what Eve did that the serpent ... I mean I just didn't learn all that until he taught me. I was like, wow that's a lesson that would have prevented all this!

### Summary

This chapter provided detailed descriptions of each research participant, five superordinate themes along with there related sub-themes: *Challenges of single mother African American mothers; Judged and stereotyped; Coping with the challenges and stereotypes; Trauma, loss, and abandonment; Self-evaluation; and Experience of God, religion and church*. The next chapter discusses the historical context and the effect of cultural trauma on the well being of single African American mothers.

## Chapter 4

### 4. Cultural and Historical Context of Single African American Mothers Cultural Trauma, Coping, and Strategies of Resistance

“I wish I could really understand where it comes from and I don’t but it’s really difficult sometimes being a black woman not even only a mother, but a woman in general with all of the negative stigma. Like I even when I said earlier, I find myself sometimes it seems I want to prove to people that am not this ghetto, uneducated, don’t know nothing type of female.”

Susan

## Introduction

The previous chapter described six superordinate themes and their underlying sub-themes in relationship to the lived experiences of single African American mothers. The above quote from one of the research participants sums up a major theme emerging from the analysis in the previous chapter. In this chapter, I explore several themes related to this quote in the context of cultural trauma. One participant, setting her identity as a single mother aside, says “Sometimes it’s really difficult being a black woman.” In being a black woman, it means you are subjected to “all of the negative stigma.” She is aware that stereotypes are projected on black women at some level but she is not certain of their origin.

Three things are clear: she is aware of the images; they have an origin she did not create; and while she does not believe that the images are who she is, she nevertheless “wants to prove to people” that she is not who *they* think she is. To understand cultural trauma in the lives of single African American mothers, I extend my examination of two themes emerging from my analysis of the research participant’s transcripts: *judged and stereotyped* and *coping with challenges and stereotypes*.

This chapter has five sections. In the first section, I provide a detailed definition of cultural trauma. I argue that perceptions of single African American mothers (real or

perceived) manifest as cultural trauma in single African American mothers because their awareness to said perceptions results in coping and resistance strategies affecting their overall well being and quality of life. In addition, the promulgation of controlling images through various forms of media, and as I discussed in chapter one, views from various politicians and prominent African American leaders consistently blaming single mothers for society's ills, adds to the stigma that produces this trauma. In the second section, using African American feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins' theory of controlling images, I trace the development of five controlling images from slavery through modern welfare debates: *mammy*, *jezebel*, *matriarch*, *welfare queen*, and the *strong black woman*. In the third section, I contend that single African American mothers present-day responses to cultural trauma are historically incorporated in three interrelated coping and resistance strategies: embodying the strong black woman; dissemblance; and shifting. In the fourth section, I use relational cultural theory to discuss how connection, disconnection, authenticity, and vulnerability affect the well being of single African American mothers. In the fifth and final section, I discuss cultural trauma in light of womanist theology.

### Cultural Trauma

#### Trauma

In chapter one, I defined cultural trauma as the ongoing emotional violence inflicted on single African American mothers through controlling images and tri-partite oppression (racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and familism). I noted psychologists Bessel Van der Kolk and Carol Gilligan's definitions of trauma. In addition to those two definitions, clinical psychologist Judith Lewis Herman, in *Trauma and Recovery*, broadened the definition of trauma to include experiences more common to women (rape,

battery, sexual and domestic violence), not previously accounted for in previous clinical diagnosis of trauma. She contends:

Psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless. At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force. When the force is that of other human beings, we speak of atrocities. Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection and meaning.<sup>218</sup>

Herman's theory transformed trauma treatment. However, feminist critics of her work noted that chronic stressors such as racism and poverty were noticeably absent from experiences she (and other psychological theorist) deemed traumatic and, like previous theories, pathological. Feminist clinical psychologist Maria Root's theory of insidious trauma accounted for this absence.

Insidious trauma is a useful framework for understanding the long-term effects of cultural trauma because it describes the cumulative degradation directed towards individuals and communities of people whose identities are different from what is valued by those who have power. In fact, according to Maria Root, "it encompasses some very normative, yet nevertheless traumatic, experiences of groups of people."<sup>219</sup> Racism is one form of insidious trauma. African American psychologist Leslie Jackson contends that for most African Americans, racism is traumatic, but because of the regularity of insidious racist insults, some African Americans may not consciously experience them as traumatic.<sup>220</sup> Root explains how this is operative in insidious trauma:

The frequency of insidious trauma results in a construction of reality in which

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<sup>218</sup> Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and recovery*, Rev ed. (New York: BasicBooks, 1997), 33.

<sup>219</sup> Maria P. P. Root, "Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on Personality," in *Personality and psychopathology: feminist reappraisals*, ed. Laura S. Brown and Mary Ballou (New York: Guilford Press, 1992), 240.

<sup>220</sup> Leslie C. Jackson, "The New Multiculturalism and Psychodynamic Theory: Psychodynamic Psychotherapy and African American Women," in *Psychotherapy with African-American women: innovations in psychodynamic perspectives and practice*, ed. Leslie C. Jackson and Beverly Greene (New York: Guilford Press, 2000), 7.



certain dimensions of security are not very secure; as such, the individual is often alert to potential threat, especially insidious experiences like ageism, homophobia, racism, and sexism. Subsequently, activation of survival behaviors, heightened sensitivity, paranoid-like behavior, and hostility are frequently observed in response to seemingly “minor” stressors by outsiders.<sup>221</sup>

These “minor stressors” are considered racial microaggressions or “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color.”<sup>222</sup>

In *Reckoning with Aggression: Theology, Violence, and Vitality*, practical theologian Kathleen Greider describes microaggressions as one of three forms of emotional violence, white supremacy, and racism. (The other two types of emotional violence she names are “whites’ inability to bear consciousness of or take responsibility for the ways that they and their ancestors have used their aggressiveness to do violence”<sup>223</sup> and emotionally destructive tactics such as mocking, minimizing, and mischaracterizing<sup>224</sup> directed at resistance movements.) She explains, in concert with Jackson, that the emotional violence of microaggressions does not have the direct impact of physical violence; rather, they are “offenses that are so quick or subtle that they may happen outside the consciousness of both whites and African Americans but are nonetheless disrespectful, exploitative, and thus violent.”<sup>225</sup> They “are an especially effective form of control: they are micro in form, compared to gross forms of racism, yet

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<sup>221</sup> Root, “Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on Personality,” 241.

<sup>222</sup> Derald Wing Sue et al., “Racial microaggressions in everyday life: Implications for clinical practice,” *American Psychologist* 62, no. 4 (May 2007): 271.

<sup>223</sup> Kathleen J. Greider, *Reckoning with aggression: theology, violence, and vitality* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 90.

<sup>224</sup> Greider, *Reckoning with aggression*, 91.

<sup>225</sup> Greider, *Reckoning with aggression*, 90.

they are macro in effect.”<sup>226</sup> Ann provides such an example when she expressed her feelings about going grocery shopping with her children:

Even when you’re a good mother, even when you’re a good black mother you still have to think about what is depicted on the screen and have to say I work my ass off! You know how much money I have in the bank? But I still have to worry about whether going to the grocery store and you think I’m on food stamps.

Her feelings exemplify the brief subtlety of microaggressions because while the slight or comment may have been intentional or unintentional, she perceives it to be. To the extent that shopping or conducting any type of business where she could be stereotyped, affects her emotionally.

### Controlling Images

Controlling images dominate public discourse and shape public policies governing sex, reproduction, and the relational lives of single African American mothers. And with the help of television and movies, they have crept into the American imagination and the psyches of African American people as truth. Womanist ethicist Emilie Townes argues, “These images have an enormous impact on how we understand the world, as well as others and ourselves in that world.”<sup>227</sup> I noted in chapter one that controlling images are not simply visual representations but they also convey culturally constructed narratives about groups and individuals that communicate how that group or individual is to be regarded by others. They are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life.<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>226</sup> Greider, *Reckoning with aggression*, 90.

<sup>227</sup> Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist ethics and the cultural production of evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 201.

<sup>228</sup> Maureen Walker and Wendy B. Rosen, eds., *How connections heal: stories from relational-cultural therapy* (New York: Guilford Press, 2004), 17.

Controlling images intersect with race, class, gender, and sexual oppression. Controlling images render African American women as “other” and are the roots of binary thinking that places them in a social position polar opposite to white women. Binary thinking frames human difference by categorizing people, things, and ideas.<sup>229</sup> Examples are white vs. black and male vs. female. The key to understanding how binary thinking works to oppress single African American mothers is that any comparison of African American women to dominant norms is “defined in oppositional terms. One part is not simply different from its counterpart; it is inherently opposed to its “other.”<sup>230</sup> According to Patricia Hill Collins, “Objectification is central to the process of oppositional difference. In binary thinking, one element is objectified as the *other*, and is viewed as an object to be manipulated and controlled.”<sup>231</sup> This means, as objects, African American women do not have the right to define themselves. This oppressive labeling, according to African American psychologist Amos Wilson, can be a form of social control affecting the consciousness and behavior of single African American mothers.

The authority to label consciousness and behavior reflects social power inequalities between the labelers and the labeled. Therefore, the authority to label is a central factor in the process of social power and often functions to maintain or increase inequalities. Labeling behavior as normal or abnormal may contribute to maintaining or enhancing prevailing power inequalities in that by directing attention to their purported intrapsychic, subcultural or genetic sources, the causal relevance of other social, political, economical phenomena in generating and maintaining such behavior are down-played, dismissed or obscured.<sup>232</sup>

Moreover, in binary thinking with African American single mothers, this objectification is viewed as good or bad. In other words, any identity or family form that is not white or

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<sup>229</sup> Collins, *Black feminist thought*, 70.

<sup>230</sup> Collins, *Black feminist thought*, 70.

<sup>231</sup> Collins, *Black feminist thought*, 70.

<sup>232</sup> Amos N. Wilson, *The falsification of Afrikan consciousness: Eurocentric history, psychiatry, and the politics of white supremacy* (New York: Afrikan World InfoSystems, 1993), 104.

nuclear is considered deviant.

Relational cultural theorist Maureen Walker says controlling images operate in four ways: the content of the objectification is determined by the dominant group; they operate without the concerns of the subjugated group; they protect the interest of the dominant group and exploit the vulnerability of the subjected group; and they justify or rationalize existing power relations.<sup>233</sup> She adds, "Controlling images become a primary means by which the disconnections of the dominant culture are enacted. Once inferior or superior status has been conferred, the images ensure that the resulting social locations will remain fixed."<sup>234</sup> I say more about this kind of disconnection later in this chapter when I discuss cultural trauma in light of relational cultural theory.

An historical examination of the ways in which single African American mothers have been scapegoated for problems not entirely of their own doing is crucial to understanding how controlling images affect the well being of single African American mothers. Four common controlling images have historically characterized single African American mothers: *mammy*, *jezebel*, *matriarch*, and *welfare queen*. I argue a fifth image, the *strong black woman*, is embodied by single African American mothers as a survival and resistance strategy against the trauma of oppression and as a protective veil from the pain and suffering caused by cultural and relational trauma. Over the years, researchers and practitioners have challenged the authenticity of these controlling images, however, they eventually morph into other oppressive images that are even more potent and covert than the original. An example of this transformation is *mammy* to *matriarch* to the

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<sup>233</sup> Maureen Walker, "Critical thinking: Challenging developmental myths, stigmas, and stereotypes," in *Diversity and development: critical contexts that shape our lives and relationships*, ed. Dana Comstock (Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole, Cengage Learning, 2005), 51.

<sup>234</sup> Walker, "Critical thinking," 51.

embodiment of the *strong black woman*.

African American clinical psychologist Kumea Shorter-Gooden explains how controlling images are embodied psychologically:

Myths and stereotypes do much of their damage subconsciously. They seep into the inner psyche and take up residence, affecting how one thinks, feels, and perceives others, even while one purports to be unbiased and tolerant. Even in some progressive minded people, stereotypes often hold sway. They're insidious. They're sneaky. They have had centuries to sink in. And every day these myths and stereotypes betray our view of ourselves as decent, fair and just and undermine our hopes and ideals. Stereotypes are damaging within a group. They often become internalized. Though invisible, they wield power. They can cause the self to diminish, to shrink, or to disappear.<sup>235</sup>

African American sociologist Cheryl-Townsend Gilkes asserts that all human experience is embodied experience. Not only is experience embodied, but also stereotypes are also embodied images.<sup>236</sup>

This chapter began with a quote taken from my conversation with Susan. When I asked her to share her thoughts and feelings about how single African American mothers are perceived by society, the media, and the African American community, she said

Negative [disappointed] and it's upsetting! I wish I could really understand where it comes from and I don't but it's really difficult sometimes being a black woman not even only a mother but a woman in general with all of the negative stigma.

Cultural critic bell hooks has written a very insightful book on black people and self-esteem, *Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem*. One of the areas she investigates is the importance of history, and the effect of the "lasting trauma" of slavery on the African American psyche.<sup>237</sup> hooks asserts,

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<sup>235</sup> Charisse Jones and Kumea Shorter-Gooden, *Shifting: the double lives of Black women in America* (New York: Perennial, 2004), 34.

<sup>236</sup> Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, *If it wasn't for the women: Black women's experience and womanist culture in church and community* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 191.

<sup>237</sup> bell hooks, *Rock my soul: black people and self-esteem* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2004), 21.

Denial, repression, and disassociation operate on a social as well as an individual level. The study of psychological trauma has an “underground” history. Like traumatized people, we have been cut off from the knowledge of our past. Like traumatized people, we need to understand the past in order to reclaim the present and the future. Therefore, an understanding of psychological trauma begins with rediscovering history. For African Americans, and all who seek to understand our experience, the legacy of trauma begins with chosen exile and slavery and it continues through the years of racial apartheid and into the civil rights era.<sup>238</sup>

When I reflect on Susan wanting to understand the origins of this “negative” stigma and hooks assertion that African American self-esteem issues are related to the lasting trauma of slavery, I contend that slavery is the starting point for understanding cultural trauma and controlling images. In the next section, I provide an historical examination of cultural trauma.

#### Cultural Trauma in Historical Context

The presence of single African American mothers began when African women were brought to the United States as slaves. Children born from sexual liaisons with male slaves and white owners were not afforded the legal protection of marriage because mothers, fathers, and children were frequently sold to other plantations. In spite of this ongoing separation of families, citing research on slave culture, sociologist Donna Franklin points out that slaves adapted to their environment and because of prohibitions on marriage, all births were out of wedlock. She contends that value system was birthed among slaves that “refrained from stigmatizing the offspring of women who gave birth outside of marriage.”<sup>239</sup> Omolade explains the relationship dynamics between enslaved mothers, mates, children, and owners:

Because the right of slaves to marry each other or to marry whites was outlawed, Black women were also denied any form of patriarchal protection. Furthermore,

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<sup>238</sup> hooks, *Rock my soul*, 24.

<sup>239</sup> Donna L. Franklin, *Ensuring inequality: the structural transformation of the African-American family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 18.

all forms of sexual activity between white men and slave women could not be considered rape, because she had no legal choice or voice to not submit. By forcing Black children to follow their mother's status and condition, slave masters could deny any responsibility for paternity, thereby enslaving their own children. In addition, Black men were prevented from assuming any responsibility for the children they sired. By requiring slavery to become the lifelong condition of Black men and women, the position of Black women would almost always be unmarried, raped, enslaved or childbearing.<sup>240</sup>

Research is conflicted as to the proportion of one and two-parent families. Some researchers argue that on most plantations nuclear families were few. However, sociologist Herbert Gutman countered this assertion with research on slave family configurations. His research focused on large plantations and he found that there were one and two-parent arrangements with the two-parent arrangements as the majority.<sup>241</sup> Regardless, most research on slavery and the African American family suggests that female-headed households were the most prevalent family form. Omolade points out that separation was expected and feared. In spite of plantations that supported long-term-stable one and two parent households, frequent family separations including the separation of children were a common occurrence that increased the number of single-mother families.<sup>242</sup>

One of the research participants said society sees a single African American mother as a “baby factory,” akin to enslaved women treated as breeders. This was the first controlling image because enslaved mothers were considered more suitable for reproduction than white women. By claiming that African American women produced children as easily as animals, this image justified the slave owners’ interference of

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<sup>240</sup> Omolade, "Unbroken Circle," 244.

<sup>241</sup> Herbert George Gutman, *The black family in slavery and freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977).

<sup>242</sup> Omolade, "Unbroken Circle," 247.

enslaved women's reproductive lives and fertility decisions.<sup>243</sup> Slave owners bred enslaved women because their children were valuable property, and if a child was female, the prospect for more slaves. Forced breeding of enslaved men and women sustained slavery when the importation of Africans was outlawed in 1808.

Enslaved females had no legal or human rights. They provided free labor, were sold as commodity to the highest bidder, and while their reproductive capacities were more valuable than male slaves, in most cases, they only nurtured their children until they were sold off—without any hope of reunion. What was most important was the enslaved woman's capacity for both social and biological reproduction of slavery that assured maximum profits and social control for slave owners. Enslaved women were expected to bear children often and if they failed, they were sold. Barren women were avoided at all costs and punished by their owners or sold to other plantations. This “coerced surrogacy” defined enslaved women's fate during the entire antebellum period.<sup>244</sup>

Laws known as slave codes dictated this inhumane treatment of slaves. Slave codes determined the rights of slave owners, and they showed them how to treat captive slaves. For example, slaves could not own property or legally defend themselves if a white person harmed them. In some areas, slave codes limited education, marriage, and movement to and from plantations. Slave codes and other laws firmly cemented slaves as property. For example, historian George Stroud explains that in Virginia, slave laws designated the status of children born to enslaved mothers as slaves regardless of the race of the father.

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<sup>243</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black feminist thought: knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 78.

<sup>244</sup> In *Sisters in the Wilderness*, Dolores Williams defined coerced surrogacy as a condition in which people and systems more powerful than black people forced black women to function in roles that ordinarily have been filled by someone else.



Be it therefore enacted and declared by this present grand assembly, that all children borne in this country shall be held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother, And that if any Christian shall commit fornication with a negro man or woman, he or she offending shall pay double the fines imposed by the former act.<sup>245</sup>

According to black feminist Dorothy Roberts, slave codes justified the violation of enslaved females on the “basis of race, and the control of women’s sexuality and reproduction.”<sup>246</sup>

The moral justification for this physical, sexual, and psychological abuse was synonymous with images of lewd, sexually deviant, and animalistic women. Feminist Nicole Rousseau found that propaganda distributed during this era depicted

black reproduction as an animal instinct of an inhuman population. Depicted as lacking the moral compass that leads civilized people to modesty, temperance and humility, African American women were often illustrated as naked savages wallowing in an overt and foul sexuality that threatens to corrupt their supposedly moral Christian captor.<sup>247</sup>

Or as Roberts asserts, slave women were not the “delicate, refined and chaste”<sup>248</sup> women of the Victorian era, the nineteenth-century image of the True Woman.<sup>249</sup> The cult of true womanhood evaluated women using the characteristics of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.<sup>250</sup>

The perverse ideology of enslaved women as sexually aggressive breeders created the *jezebel-controlling* image. According to Historian Deborah Gray White, *jezebel* is the

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<sup>245</sup> George M. Stroud, *Stroud's Slave Laws: a sketch of the laws relating to slavery in the several states of the United States of America* (1856; repr., Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2005).

<sup>246</sup> Dorothy E. Roberts, *Killing the black body: race, reproduction, and the meaning of liberty* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), 23.

<sup>247</sup> Nicole Rousseau, *Black woman's burden: commodifying black reproduction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 71.

<sup>248</sup> Roberts, *Killing the black body*, 18.

<sup>249</sup> Roberts, *Killing the black body*, 10.

<sup>250</sup> Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (July 1966).

“counter image of the Victorian lady.”<sup>251</sup> This controlling image is named for the Jezebel whose story is told in the Old Testament book of First Kings.<sup>252</sup> She is King Ahab’s wife, is noted for her sexual prowess, and is known to have controlled and manipulated King Ahab through sex and idolatry. Collins contends that this type of sexuality is used to symbolize African American women’s sexual behavior:

Jezebel is a deviant Black female sexuality that originated under slavery to relegate all slave women to the category of sexually aggressive women, thus providing a powerful rationale for the widespread sexual assaults by white men. Jezebel served yet another function. If slave women could be portrayed as having excessive sexual appetites, then increased fertility should be the expected outcome.<sup>253</sup>

The antithesis of *jezebel* is *mammy*. Mammies were considered obedient house servants and mother figures in their master’s homes. She is characterized as super mothering, asexual, self-sacrificing, an excellent cook, an excellent housekeeper, and loyal. She is immortalized as Aunt Jemima, the smiling, fat, black handkerchief woman on pancake boxes and syrup bottles. Mammies allegedly received more favorable treatment than female field slaves; however, her obedience did not translate into virtue or value as a mother. Collins argues that the *mammy* image represents the virtues of black womanhood and in embodying this image, they were encouraged to pass mammy-like behaviors to their children.<sup>254</sup>

Womanist theologian Dolores Williams explains that mammies, unlike field slaves, were content with submitting to their mistresses. This act of submission meant that they could be converted to a Victorian woman. It could be argued that slavery was a

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<sup>251</sup> Deborah G. White, *Ar'n't I a woman?: female slaves in the plantation South*, Rev. ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 29.

<sup>252</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Kings (NRSV).

<sup>253</sup> Collins, *Black feminist thought*, 82.

<sup>254</sup> Collins, *Black feminist thought*.

tool for converting some heathen black women into civilized models of womanhood. Mammies were living proof that the conversion could be accomplished.<sup>255</sup> Mammies—unlike other enslaved females’ non-compliance with their master’s attempts at complete submission and control, who often risked their lives to escape the chains of slavery—were portrayed as not wanting freedom because they were too busy pleasing white families.

Womanist ethicist Emilie Townes points out that the evil intent of supporting the mammy image proved, in the interests of the “economic, political and social interests of white ideology and history in the United States, that Black women (and by extension children and men) were happy with their enslavement.”<sup>256</sup> More than anything, Townes argued that *mammy* was actually a façade used to mask white male sexual exploitation of enslaved females.<sup>257</sup> Sociologist Cheryl Townsend-Gilkes notes that enslaved women emerged from slavery firmly enshrined in the U.S. consciousness as *mammy* and *jezebel*.<sup>258</sup>

When millions of freed slaves entered the post-antebellum world, they were no longer the economic assets that defined the American political landscape. Male and female slaves were now allowed to move and work in available jobs. Many newly freed African American women chose jobs as domestic servants, sharecroppers, and laundresses. Although physically free, they were still subjected to harsh verbal, physical, and emotional abuse by employers.

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<sup>255</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the wilderness*, 64.

<sup>256</sup> Townes, *Womanist ethics and the cultural production of evil*, 31.

<sup>257</sup> Townes, *Womanist ethics and the cultural production of evil*, 31-32.

<sup>258</sup> Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, "From Slavery to Social Welfare: Racism and the Control of Black Women," in *Class, race, and sex: the dynamics of control*, ed. Amy Swerdlow and Johanna Lessinger (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1983), 294.

The Great Depression shifted the U.S. economy because when jobs diminished, more people were dependent on government support. Because the period when African American women's reproduction was profitable ended when slaves were freed, the large amount of poor single African American mothers without jobs and needing support for their children became a national concern. Their presence resulted in restrictive policies and practices around child bearing and coerced sterilization practices that thwarted the growth of the African-American population.<sup>259</sup> It also severely affected many women who cared for their children without support from fathers who migrated north for better job opportunities. After slavery, some women became single mothers because they were separated from and never reunited with their lovers or husbands who left their families in search of employment.

In chapter one, I discussed the research of W.E.B. Du Bois and E. Franklin Frazier on post-slavery African American families. Both sociologists influenced the use of the *matriarch* controlling image when they connected high rates of poverty to the disproportionate number of female-headed households. Even though both were later criticized by revisionist researchers for blaming African American mothers for social problems in black communities, Collins emphasizes that neither scholar interpreted African American women's centrality in African American families as a cause of African-American social class status. "Both saw so-called matriarchal families as an outcome of racial oppression and poverty."<sup>260</sup>

In contrast to the sexually promiscuous and immoral *jezebel*, matriarchs are the alter egos of the submissive and passive mammy. Matriarchs are portrayed as angry,

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<sup>260</sup> Collins, *Black feminist thought*, 75.

controlling, and castrating heads of families who are unable to submit quietly to male control. The matriarch is assigned three characteristics: the unwillingness to maintain the role of femininity and its accompanying behavior; the refusal to be controlled, to her detriment, by black men; and she supports racial oppression because she does not conform to the cult of true womanhood. Collins explains that labeling African American women as “unfeminine and too strong” undercuts their ability to be assertive and make their needs known.<sup>261</sup> Juanita says this prevalent view of single African American mothers in society as “you’re slutty having babies or you’re a single mom who’s bitter who don’t get no man. It’s either one. It’s never you’re just a good woman with a child just trying to do your thing. It’s never that! It’s always you’re a baby factory or you’re a bitter woman.”

E. Franklin Frazier explains that the matriarch image shifts focus from sexuality to the African American woman’s inappropriate role in the family.

These women had doubtless been schooled in self-reliance and self-sufficiency during slavery. As a rule, the Negro woman as wife or mother was the mistress of her cabin, and, save for the interference of master or overseer, her wishes in regard to mating and family matters were paramount. Neither economic necessity nor tradition had instilled in her the spirit of subordination to masculine authority. Emancipation only tended to confirm in many cases the spirit of self-sufficiency which slavery had taught.<sup>262</sup>

He argued that African American matriarchal families emerged from forced separation of slave families. Frazier went beyond Du Bois, describing African American women as a more controlling force than men in slave households—self-reliant, self-sufficient, and lacking a “spirit of subordination to masculine authority.”<sup>263</sup>

I mentioned revisionist scholars in chapter one as scholars who countered

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<sup>261</sup> Collins, *Black feminist thought*, 76.

<sup>262</sup> Frazier, *The Negro family in the United States*, 125.

<sup>263</sup> Frazier, *The Negro family in the United States*, 125.

disparaging theories about the African American family with Even though revisionists countered this theory, arguing that African American family structure should not be measured against the white Eurocentric family; the myth of the *matriarch* became a more prominent image with the infamous Moynihan report. Moynihan said that the matriarchal structure of African American families is disadvantageous for African American because they are not aligned with societal norms.<sup>264</sup> Collins points out that before the Moynihan report was published, *matriarchs* were relegated to scholarly closets. In other words, branding African American women as *matriarchs* did not have the same political effect as Moynihan's report because the "political disenfranchisement and economic exploitation of African-Americans was so entrenched that control over Black women could be maintained without the matriarchal stereotype."<sup>265</sup>

Revisionist scholars responded to the Moynihan report by asserting that it affirmed African American women's capacity to be adaptive and resilient. This more humane image of single African American mothers did little to influence welfare reform policies during the Reagan and Clinton presidencies. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, the controlling image of the *welfare queen* became the de facto image for all welfare dependent African American mothers. The *welfare queen* received even more attention after the 1986 publically broadcasted television special *The Vanishing Family: Crisis in Black America*. In this documentary, Bill Moyers, the program's host, interviewed single African American mothers. For the most part, the women confirmed Moynihan's thesis by telling Moyers that they were content with raising their children

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<sup>264</sup> Moynihan, *The Negro family*.

<sup>265</sup> Collins, *Black feminist thought*, 75.

alone because they did not have fathers.<sup>266</sup> Unfortunately, many of the women were poor and on welfare. The *welfare queen* is considered a modern-day *jezebel* because she is thought to be a lazy single African American mother with a poor work ethic who is government-dependent and intentionally bearing children out of wedlock to avoid work. The *welfare queen* controlling image emerged in my conversations with the research participants who told me they were perceived as “sexually promiscuous” welfare recipients because they were alone with a child.

The *welfare queen*, like her sisters, *jezebel*, *mammy*, and *matriarch*, is a politically concocted image used to maintain its hegemonic control over single African American women’s reproduction and economic status. This image is the culmination of political efforts branding single African American mothers as deviant social problems. The irony of the *welfare queen* is that welfare policies that were intended to help sustain single mothers became a problem when the number of single African American mothers seeking assistance increased. Collins explains that the *welfare queen* is, tied to working-class black women’s increasing access to U.S. welfare state entitlements. At its core, the image of the welfare mother constitutes a class-specific controlling image developed for poor, working-class Black women who make use of social welfare benefits to which they are entitled by law.<sup>267</sup>

Annelise Orleck conducted a study on welfare activism in Las Vegas, Nevada. In *Storming Caesars Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty*, Orleck describes the courageous efforts of welfare-rights activist Ruby Duncan. As the executive director of Operation Life, she successfully influenced reversal of constricting

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<sup>266</sup> Bill D. Moyers. "The Vanishing family: crisis in Black America," *CBS Reports* (Aired January 25, 1986, on CBS. Carousel Film and Video, 1986).

<sup>267</sup> Collins, *Black feminist thought*, 78.

welfare policies in Las Vegas.<sup>268</sup> After the creation of AFDC in 1935, Nevada refused to participate in the program for twenty years until they reluctantly offered minimal assistance to poor single African American mothers while accumulating million dollar surpluses because they created policies that denied benefits to poor single African American mothers. This activism successfully changed welfare policies in Nevada when politicians realized the economic benefits beyond the small of money welfare recipients received actually benefited from Nevada's economic climate. Orleck's study demonstrates that poor single African American mothers in a rural Nevada community were not complacent with their oppressive realities. Rather the controlling image of the *welfare queen* forced politicians to put her back in her mammified place.

#### Cultural Trauma, Coping, and Strategies of Resistance

History is replete with numerous accounts delineating horrors, pain, and suffering inflicted on enslaved females. However, not all enslaved females accepted their life conditions passively and helplessly. Slave narratives and other historical documents describe how enslaved females controlled and manipulated their environments, exhibiting agency as they survived the inhumane conditions of slavery. Enslaved females like their male counterparts, attempted and sometimes successfully escaped bondage and joined revolts--even in the face of failure, severe punishment, and death. They also faked illnesses and destroyed property to avoid work. Deception helped enslaved females resist reproductive control when they practiced abstinence and refused sex with fellow male slaves and white men. There is evidence that enslaved females regularly aborted babies and were excused from work because of illness related to their pregnancies.

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<sup>268</sup> Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesars Palace: how Black mothers fought their own war on poverty* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005).



A conscious awareness of controlling images can influence behaviors serving as another layer of control. For example, an image can be a form of protection from women who suppress their emotions to appear strong in the face of oppression. This protection can force single African American mothers to restrict significant parts of themselves in relational interactions because they are not showing their authentic selves and instead appears as though they are not harmed by the experience. There is evidence of this behavior in slavery. For example, even though white-male power oppressed enslaved females, resistance for them was strength in suffering. Often times this strength was muted. Enslaved children were forced to helplessly watch how abused adults reacted and behaved. Historian Heather Williams notes, that enslaved children learned they were vulnerable, powerless, and had no control over their lives.

Children learned slowly that slavery meant vulnerability and lack of control. They watched the people around them for clues as to what words and actions meant. Reading lips, interpreting expressions, sensing the tension among adults, and watching their mothers' agitation, some came to understand that strange white men might signify sale, that sale meant separation, and that the black adults in their lives were unable to disrupt the plans their owners had put into play.<sup>269</sup>

When they resisted oppression, they were consciously aware of the damage that their property and breeding status inflicted on their minds, bodies and souls.

Out of this strength-in-suffering behavior emerged the *strong black woman* image. Jackson explains that a "particular poignant legacy of slavery and continuing cultural constraint is the ideal of the *strong black woman*, who is selfless, nonsexual, all giving, and protective of others in the family and community."<sup>270</sup> I argue that the *strong black woman* is a controlling image that both normalizes and affects the behavior of

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<sup>269</sup> Heather Andrea Williams, *Help me to find my people: the African American search for family lost in slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 29.

<sup>270</sup> Jackson, "The New Multiculturalism and Psychodynamic Theory," 7.

single African American mothers. Clinical psychologist Beverly Greene describes this as internalized racism because the fear of expressing any behavior that is associated with negative stereotypes proves that they are valid.<sup>271</sup> The *strong black woman* is akin to what clinical psychologist Yvonne Jenkins and womanist theologian Karen Baker-Fletcher calls the *superwoman* image.<sup>272</sup> According to Jenkins,

Behaviors associated with the superwoman image symbolize internalizations of dominance or oppression. Those who have internalized this stereotype often seek to undo perceptions of African American women as incompetent, and incapable of success. Furthermore, sometimes these internalizations are an attempt to suppress uncomfortable affect.<sup>273</sup>

Sociologist Shirley Hill is right when she applauds the efforts of researchers to contest negative images of African American women while also arguing that those images have “all too often been replaced by an equally toxic set of images.”<sup>274</sup> Jackson explains this in the case of the *mammy* and the *strong black woman*. She argues that the *strong black woman* is the *mammy* in contemporary form. “During slave times, this role was adaptive for survival, but it also required a connection to the oppressor and a disconnection from the self.”<sup>275</sup>

Hill argues that the notion of strength is the dominant and most pernicious dimension of the cultural construction of African American motherhood.<sup>276</sup> In her clinical work with African American women, clinical psychologist Regina Romero discovered

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<sup>271</sup> Greene, “African American Women,” 20.

<sup>272</sup> Karen Baker-Fletcher and Garth Kasimu Baker-Fletcher, *My sister, my brother: womanist and Xodus God-talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997).

<sup>273</sup> Yvonne M. Jenkins, “The Stone Center Theoretical Approach Revisited: Applications for African American Women,” in *Psychotherapy with African American Women: Innovations in Psychodynamic Perspectives and Practice*, ed. Leslie C. Jackson and Beverly Greene (New York: Guilford Press, 2000), 78.

<sup>274</sup> Shirley A. Hill, “Cultural Images and the Health of African American Women,” *Gender and Society* 23, no. 6 (December 2009): 734.

<sup>275</sup> Jackson, “The New Multiculturalism and Psychodynamic Theory,” 7.

<sup>276</sup> Hill, “Cultural Images and the Health of African American Women,” 737.

that they consistently used the term *strong* to describe themselves. She says the *strong black woman* is form of survival and resistance that helps African American women cope with cultural trauma. As Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant posits, "In adopting strength as a self-protective strategy, Black women present themselves as capable of weathering all manner of adversity. In other words, many Black women fight strength with strength: They manage unfair claims as though such were legitimate."<sup>277</sup>

Romero found that strength referred to the determination and capacity to deal with adversity associated with being African American or a strong sense of self that one's identity could not be obscured by others.<sup>278</sup> Baker-Fletcher explains that the *strong black woman* is deceptive and insidious and she adds that many African American women are easily tempted to identify themselves as strong black women, "making it a popular icon that has spiritual and moral value. While other stereotypes are undeniably disparaging and degrading, the myth of the strong black woman has pseudo-exalted character."<sup>279</sup>

Romero points out that, while it helps African American women remain tenacious against the dual oppression of racism and sexism; "it is also an albatross around her neck. It keeps her from falling victim to her own despair..."<sup>280</sup> The image prevents her from embracing the fullness of her humanity. Hill explains, "When black women are expected to be super-strong, they cannot be simply human. What begins as a empowering self-definition can quickly become a prison."<sup>281</sup> Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant explains,

Because the idea of strength appears to honestly reflect Black women's extensive work and family demands, as well as their accomplishments under far from

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<sup>277</sup> Beauboeuf-Lafontant, *Behind the mask of the strong black woman*, 7.

<sup>278</sup> Regina E. Romero, "The Icon of the Strong Black Woman: The Paradox of Strength," in *Psychotherapy with African-American women: innovations in psychodynamic perspectives and practice*, ed. Leslie C. Jackson and Beverly Greene (New York: Guilford Press, 2000), 226.

<sup>279</sup> Baker-Fletcher and Baker-Fletcher, *My sister, my brother*, 143.

<sup>280</sup> Romero, "The Icon of the Strong Black Woman," 225.

<sup>281</sup> Hill, "Cultural Images and the Health of African American Women," 737.

favorable social conditions, the concept seems to provide a simple and in fact honorable recognition of their lives. However, appearances are often deceiving, and much of the acclaim that the concept of strength provides for Black women is undermined by what I argue is its real function: to defend and maintain a stratified social order by obscuring Black women's experiences of suffering, acts of desperation, and anger.<sup>282</sup>

When strength is embodied as a resistance strategy, it makes it difficult for African American women to acknowledge painful feelings or admit an emotional need. When she has flashes of vulnerability, because strength has been normalized, her needs are not met. Romero contends that when African American women suppress feelings and or show any signs of vulnerability, they are inadvertently conforming to society's expectation that African American women can "handle losses, traumas, failed relationships, and the dual oppressions of racism and sexism--falling short of this expectation is viewed by many as a personal failure."<sup>283</sup>

Sociologist Niara Sudarkasa traces the evolution of the *strong black woman* to pre-colonial Africa and slavery. Women in traditional pre-colonial Africa played important roles in the economies of their societies, where many were involved in farming, trade, and craft production. They were described as queen mothers, queen sisters, princesses, chiefs, and holders of other offices in towns and villages.<sup>284</sup> African women were well respected for the familial and spiritual leadership of families and tribes before the onset of colonization and the slave trade.

To call the *strong black woman* myth is a misnomer because, for some, it genuinely reflects one's agency to construct an alternative image that, on the surface is

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<sup>282</sup> Beauboeuf-Lafontant, *Behind the mask of the strong black woman*, 2.

<sup>283</sup> Romero, "The Icon of the Strong Black Woman," 227.

<sup>284</sup> Niara Sudarkasa, "The Status of Women in Indigenous African Societies," in *Women in Africa and the African diaspora: a reader*, ed. Rosalyn Terborg-Penn and Andrea Benton Rushing (Washington: Howard University Press, 1996), 73.

more life giving. Harris-Perry argues that the *strong black woman* is truer to reality than *jezebel* and *matriarch* because many African American mothers valorize the image as the “defining quality of black motherhood.”<sup>285</sup> “Such women are typically held in high regard for managing multiple life challenges with grace and wells of love for others in their care.”<sup>286</sup> Several research participants observed this in their mothers and grandmothers. In fact one research participant celebrated the legacy of strong women in her family:

From my own personal observations...my mother although less educated than my father was the stronger parent. My grandmother was the strong parent in her marriage. These were both women who were married for years. My great-grandmother was the strongest in the family so I observed women be strong. In our society the black family is really what is it, matriarchy. We are a matriarchy society. That is one of my theories and whether it is by circumstance or choice, we embrace that adjective that ability to nurture our families. I see this modeled in my family.

Romero explains that African American women learn early on that they should not rely on anyone else to meet their needs, and that they must become emotionally and economically self-sufficient.<sup>287</sup>

Collins points out that literature on African American mothers “found few matriarchs and even fewer mammies. Instead this literature portrays African-American mothers as complex individuals who often show tremendous strength under adverse conditions, or who become beaten down by the incessant demands of providing for their families.”<sup>288</sup> Beauboeuf-Lafontant contends that the ideology of the *strong black woman* subjugates African American women like *mammy*, *matriarch*, *jezebel*, and *welfare queen*. Thus as long as African American women live as strong black women; this maintains a

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<sup>285</sup> Harris-Perry, *Sister citizen*, 185.

<sup>286</sup> Beauboeuf-Lafontant, *Behind the mask of the strong black woman*, 75.

<sup>287</sup> Romero, “The Icon of the Strong Black Woman,” 227.

<sup>288</sup> Collins, *Black feminist thought*, 76.

reassuring conviction “that personal actions and agency trump all manner of social abuses. Therefore, the presence of “strong black women” soothes many a conscience that could be troubled by the material conditions forced upon such persons and the toll of organized injustice on their humanity. In other words, strong black women do not simply exist, they play critical roles in the societal imagination and in social life.<sup>289</sup> Harris-Perry notes that African American women who resist controlling images in the name of strength are role models, “because black women draw encouragement and self-assurance from an icon able to overcome great obstacles.”<sup>290</sup>

African American history reveals that strength was nurtured during slavery and reinforced through resistance movements. The evolution of the *strong black woman* is characterized by how enslaved females coped and survived constant physical and sexual assaults on their bodies; and the loss of children, mates, and other family. Williams described the mechanisms that African Americans used to cope with intersecting challenges of slavery.

African Americans had developed mechanisms in slavery that helped them to survive: faith, hope, music, community, and literacy. Many had buried their grief, suppressed their anger, smiled, danced, and denied abuse at the command of owners and traders. They had sung as they wept and had sung to keep from weeping. Some had spent time at the crossroads trying to figure out how they would go on. Through all of it, many had held memories of their children, spouses, parents, siblings, and friends.<sup>291</sup>

Historians uncovered numerous stories of survival and resistance. For example, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Jacobs, and Ellen Craft are celebrated for resisting slavery’s attack on their humanity.

Many resistance stories did not garner the attention of these notable women;

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<sup>289</sup> Beauboeuf-Lafontant, *Behind the mask of the strong black woman*, 3.

<sup>290</sup> Harris-Perry, *Sister citizen*, 184.

<sup>291</sup> Williams, *Help me to find my people*, 155.

however, it is by virtue of their stories that we can assume some slave women did not entirely succumb to their oppression. Historian Darlene Clark Hine points out that fortitude helped many enslaved females survive the vilest of human conditions: “Where life was most difficult and choices most limited, black women had victories. They reared children who loved and respected them. They passed on from generation to generation values that made life possible and worth living. They turned survival into an art and a form of resistance to oppression.”<sup>292</sup> Survival was an individual and communal necessity because black females, who endured their oppressive conditions, found something to hope for when they awoke each day under someone else’s control.

Historical documents provide evidence that obedience, self-reliance, self-sufficiency, and dissemblance were key survival strategies for enslaved females. Obedience meant compliance with the master’s advances and anything they were asked to do; otherwise, they risked being whipped, beaten, or raped. Self-reliance and self-sufficiency were necessary because as White notes, the lack of protection from male slaves against physical and sexual violence meant that enslaved females “had to develop their own means of resistance and survival.”<sup>293</sup> For example, many enslaved females had skills that were likely honed in Africa and passed on from female ancestors. These and others skills learned from white mistresses were passed to their daughters. They utilized skills such as basket weaving, nursing, cooking, and sewing to ease the burden of slavery and provide for their families.

Emotional control through dissemblance and shifting were key survival strategies for enslaved females. Dissemblance conceals the true self when one hides behind another

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<sup>292</sup> Hine and Thompson, *A shining thread of hope*, 66.

<sup>293</sup> White, *Ar’n’t I a woman?*, 119.

persona or it is in essence two faces. According to Hine, enslaved females practiced dissemblance to “compose an inner reality that her oppressors could not touch. This ‘self’ remained intact no matter what she did to meet the demands made upon her by slaveholders, white society, or black men. Dissemblance was required to protect this self, and so dissemblance became a valued skill.”<sup>294</sup> Harris-Perry, analyzing Hine’s theory, calls dissemblance a psychic-safe space.

Hine’s work shows that by divulging little about their personal lives, revealing next to nothing about their own interests, triumphs, or defeats, and shielding their authentic personalities behind a performance of racial and gender tropes, black women crafted a kind of psychic safe-space beyond the surveillance of the white families for whom they worked.<sup>295</sup>

Mothers passed this on to their daughters when they taught them to accommodate their masters by “smiling and ready to please. At the same time, she was to have a secret place inside her full of self-respect.”<sup>296</sup> According to Jones and Shorter-Gooden, African American women *shift* to both protect themselves from oppression and to assuage those who feel threatened by their presence.

Black women in our country have had to perfect what we call “shifting,” a sort of subterfuge that African Americans have long practiced to ensure their survival in our society. Perhaps more than any other group of Americans, Black women are relentlessly pushed to serve and satisfy others and made to hide their true selves to placate White colleagues, Black men, and other segments of the community. They shift to accommodate differences in class as well as gender and ethnicity. From one moment to the next, they change their outward behavior, attitude, or tone, shifting “White,” then shifting “Black” again, shifting “corporate,” shifting “cool.” And shifting has become such an integral part of Black women’s behavior that some adopt an alternate pose or voice as easily as they blink their eyes or draw a breath—without thinking, and without realizing that the emptiness they feel and the roles they must play may be directly related. <sup>297</sup>

Dissemblance and shifting were viable coping resources used by enslaved females and

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<sup>294</sup> Hine and Thompson, *A shining thread of hope*, 100.

<sup>295</sup> Harris-Perry, *Sister citizen*, 59.

<sup>296</sup> Hine and Thompson, *A shining thread of hope*, 73.

<sup>297</sup> Jones and Shorter-Gooden, *Shifting*, 5.



their daughters to shield important emotional areas against hurt and harm. Essentially children were provided with the skills of racial resilience where mothers openly shared the tools of emotional protection. When this instruction is not intentionally given to children and is instead modeled by behavior in relational interactions, Walker explains,

In a racially stratified society, children will become adept at relating through strategies of disconnection and withholding vital parts of themselves in order to avoid harm and humiliation. When the child views herself primarily through the eyes of a devaluing culture, her “withholding” may include holding back her talents and capabilities, as well as her expectations and hopes for success outcomes.<sup>298</sup>

Unfortunately, embodying the *strong black woman* can negatively affect the health of single African American mothers. For example, in her article on single African American mothers, stress, and cardiovascular disease, Hill observed that many single African American mothers adopt an attitude that “they can go at it alone without others.”<sup>299</sup> She explains that this behavior has health consequences because it “fosters silence and social isolation among those who feel they are ‘less than a woman’ if they show signs of weakness and vulnerability... The strength mandate denies that that they need companionship, social support, or emotional intimacy and is often a barrier to relationships.”<sup>300</sup> I gleaned that this was the case in some of the research participants’ relationships. For example, one research participant described how she responded to her married lover when she told him she was pregnant:

When I first found out I got pregnant and I told him about it, his initial reaction was, “You must want to get married?” I was like, “No I don’t.” I knew when I had my baby that I was having my baby. I didn’t ever have any expectations from him. I felt like it was all on me and I would take care of her...

In addition to this example, the courage and will to do it alone was evident in my

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<sup>298</sup> Walker, "Critical thinking," 52.

<sup>299</sup> Hill, "Cultural Images and the Health of African American Women," 738.

<sup>300</sup> Hill, "Cultural Images and the Health of African American Women," 738.

conversations with most of the research participants, particularly those who had their children out of wedlock.

This was not without challenges or wanting the fathers' involvement; it was more of an expectation. In their stories, with the exception of one endearing father and some loving grandfathers, whether the research participant's mothers and grandmothers were married, the women for the most part were doing it alone. Harris-Perry explains that being *strong black women* is expected of them regardless of the challenges. She contends that the *strong black woman* "creates specific expectations for their behavior within the American polity."<sup>301</sup>

The intersecting layers of oppression within cultural trauma and the controlling image of *the strong black woman* mediate interpersonal relationships. According to Collins, these intersecting layers of oppression are organized around matrices of domination. A matrix of domination is the overall social organization within which intersecting oppressions originate, develop, and are contained.<sup>302</sup> Each of four interrelated domains serves a particular purpose: structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal. The structural domain organizes oppression; the disciplinary domain manages oppression; the hegemonic domain justifies oppression; and the interpersonal domain influences everyday lived experience and the individual consciousness that ensues.<sup>303</sup> Collins explains that the "interpersonal domain functions through routinized, day-to-day practices of how people treat one another. Such practices are systematic, recurrent, and so familiar that they often go unnoticed. Because the interpersonal domain stresses the everyday, resistance strategies within this domain can take as many forms as

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<sup>301</sup> Harris-Perry, *Sister citizen*, 21.

<sup>302</sup> Collins, *Black feminist thought*, 227-28.

<sup>303</sup> Collins, *Black feminist thought*, 276.

there are individuals.<sup>304</sup>

The research participants' full narratives are interwoven in a complex web of interpersonal relationships characterized by yearnings for meaningful and nurturing connections with parents, children, and significant others. Experiences of disconnection are also present. Disconnections are the emotional space where the *strong black woman* thrives. Connection and disconnection are key themes in the psychological and psychotherapeutic approach known as relational cultural theory and relational cultural therapy (RCT). I examine cultural trauma, the controlling images, and relational cultural theory in the next section. My rationale for using RCT lies in the model's focus on and integration of relationships and culture as central to women's development, growth, healing, and suffering.

#### Cultural Trauma and Relational Cultural Theory

Psychologist Jean Baker Miller and her colleagues at the Stone Center developed RCT privileging relationships in women's development. Originally called as relational theory and developed from therapy with middle-class white women, it later became known as relational cultural theory and it adapted cultural dimensions of the relationships of diverse women and men. Relationships are understood as interactions with others occurring over one's lifecycle.<sup>305</sup> The centrality of relationships for women's development contrasts psychological theories arguing that separation, individuation, and the emergence of a separate autonomous self is the goal of development. Walker et al. argue that psychological theories grounded in this philosophy show that persons with cultural privilege can falsely appear more self-sufficient and so are judged as healthier,

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<sup>304</sup> Collins, *Black feminist thought*, 287-88.

<sup>305</sup> Jean Baker Miller and Irene P. Stiver, *The healing connection: how women form relationships in therapy and in life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 26.

more mature, more worthy of the privilege the society affords. Those who enjoy less cultural privilege (whether by virtue of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or economic status) will likely be viewed as deficient and needy or be subjected to systematic disadvantage and culture shaming.<sup>306</sup>

In RCT, human beings grow through and toward connection over the life-span. Miller posits that growth, empowerment, and healing occur in growth-oriented movement in relationship with others or in mutually empathic or growth-fostering relationships. Growth-fostering relationships are characterized by *five good things*: a sense of zest or well-being that comes from connecting with another person or other persons; the ability and motivation to take action in the relationship as well as other situations; increased knowledge of oneself and the other person(s); an increased sense of worth; and a desire for more connections beyond the particular one.<sup>307</sup> Connections are mutually empathic and empowering interactions between two or more people who are emotionally accessible to each other.<sup>308</sup> Connections are essential to our quality of life. These types of relationships contribute to healthy functioning and flourishing. Growth-fostering relationships also have the essential elements of engagement, authenticity, mutual empathy, and mutual empowerment.

Engagement is expressing interest in the relationship in a way that leads to the possibility of sharing one's thoughts and feelings. African American psychologist Yvonne Jenkins applied RCT to African American women, noting that engagement is necessary for African American women, since some are routinely silenced, rendered

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<sup>306</sup> Maureen Walker, Judith V. Jordan, and Linda M. Hartling, eds., *The complexity of connection: writings from the Stone Center's Jean Baker Miller Training Institute* (New York: Guilford Press, 2004).

<sup>307</sup> Jean Baker Miller, "Connections, Disconnections, and Violations," *Feminism & Psychology* 18, no. 3 (August 1, 2008): 3.

<sup>308</sup> Miller and Stiver, *The healing connection*, 26.

invisible, or not taken seriously by institutions.<sup>309</sup>

Authenticity, a core value in RCT, is one's genuine capacity to state one's feelings and thoughts directly or to represent one's experience as it arises. Miller and Stiver explain that one's capacity for authenticity "is not a static state that is achieved as a discrete moment in time; it is a person's ongoing ability to represent him or herself in a relationship with increasing truth and fullness."<sup>310</sup>

Mutual empathy joins of two people who both respect and understand each other's thoughts and feelings. Mutual empowerment is the outcome of mutual empathy. The power fostered in growth-promoting relational contexts is not *power over* but *power with*. Through shared understanding evoked by mutual empathy, each person is empowered to act on behalf of the other.

Miller and Stiver conclude that engagement, authenticity, mutual empathy, and mutual empowerment are goals of development because development is "the increasing ability to build and enlarge mutually enhancing relationships in which each person can feel an increased sense of well-being through being in touch with others and finding ways to act on her thoughts and feelings."<sup>311</sup>

In RCT, disconnection is the opposite of connection. RCT recognizes that human growth and disconnection occurs at the individual, family, and societal levels. Disconnections are painful interactions of misunderstanding in interpersonal relationships. Further disconnections occur when "we feel cut off from those with whom we share a relationship."<sup>312</sup> Though some disconnection should be expected in all

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<sup>309</sup> Jenkins, "The Stone Center Theoretical Approach Revisited," 66.

<sup>310</sup> Miller and Stiver, *The healing connection*, 54.

<sup>311</sup> Miller and Stiver, *The healing connection*, 47.

<sup>312</sup> Miller and Stiver, *The healing connection*, 11.

relationships, chronic disconnections are sources of pain and suffering. At the societal level, experiences of oppression and marginalization are sources of disconnections.

Comstock et al. explain that

RCT is based on the assumption that experiences of isolation, shame, humiliation, oppression, marginalization and microaggressions are relational violations and trauma that are at the core of human suffering and threaten the survival of humankind. Cultural oppression, social exclusion, and other forms of social injustices underlie the pain and trauma that individuals in marginalized and devalued groups routinely experience in their lives.<sup>313</sup>

As I mentioned earlier, on the one hand, RCT asserts that growth-promoting power or *power with* fosters mutuality and vulnerability in growth-fostering relationships. On the other hand, in society, *power over* stratifies racial groups and marginalized communities. According to Walker, “power differentials, forces of stratification, privilege, and marginalization can disconnect and disempower individuals and groups of people. The exercise of power over others (dominance), unilateral influence, and/or coercive control is a prime deterrent to mutuality.”<sup>314</sup> Thus, stratification can determine one’s fitness for connection and the relationships to which one is entitled.

African American women experience interpersonal and societal disconnections. Beyond the expectable disconnections experienced by all people, Walker contends that racism, sexism and internalized oppression damage connection to self and others. For example, she notes that traumatic experiences that create disconnection can be dually traumatic, especially when African American women experience some form of interpersonal violence. This occurs in a sociocultural context that implicitly condones the devaluation of all women, and African American women especially. In other words, the

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<sup>313</sup> Dana L. Comstock et al., "Relational-Cultural Theory: A Framework for Bridging Relational, Multicultural, and Social Justice Competencies," *Journal of Counseling and Development* 86, no. 3 (Summer 2008): 280.

<sup>314</sup> Walker, Jordan, and Hartling, *The complexity of connection*, 3.

dominant culture may function as the agent of disconnection and violation through the proliferation of controlling images.<sup>315</sup> In RCT, controlling images become a primary means by which disconnections of the dominant culture are enacted, because they limit our perceptions of who we are, who we can become, and they are used to “instill in subjugated groups the belief that they are a problem people.”<sup>316</sup>

Similar to single African American mothers embodying the *strong black woman* as a resistance strategy against controlling images and a form of oppression denying one’s full humanity, strategies of disconnection are also forms of internalized oppression and coping mechanisms. Strategies of disconnection are enacted through deeply held relational images that cause women to minimize vulnerability in relationships. Relational images are inner pictures of our experience in relationships. Based on one’s previous experience in relationships, holding on to relational images rooted in experiences of disconnection causes one to avoid authenticity even, as RCT argues, in one’s yearning for connection. RCT refers to this as the relational paradox. Walker explains that strategies of disconnection have ramifications for one’s movement in relationship:

Strategies of disconnection give rise to internalized oppression; a complex of relational images grounded in distorted and disinformation required normalizing inequalities of a “power over” culture. Inasmuch as relational images shape the interpretation of experience and of expectation, they have specific implications for movement in relationship.<sup>317</sup>

Walker posits that strategies of disconnection operate as internalized oppression that manifests in five relational themes: invisibility in connection; spotlight anxiety; hyper-visibility; striving superstar; and learned hopelessness. Invisibility manifests when African American women disown their own race to take on characteristics of the

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<sup>315</sup> Miller and Stiver, *The healing connection*, 26.

<sup>316</sup> Walker, "Critical thinking," 53.

<sup>317</sup> Walker, "Critical thinking," 54.

dominant race. Spotlight anxiety has the same function as shifting, in that one does not present a full self in order to “assuage the anxiety of dominant group members.”<sup>318</sup> Hyper-invisibility allows one to hide from relationship by exaggerating certain aspects of the self.”<sup>319</sup> Walker provides an example of a woman who is more comfortable expressing rage than “grappling with the complexities of her self-doubt and private sorrow.”<sup>320</sup> The striving superstar is most salient for single African American mothers who resist the judgment of the dominant group by going beyond to prove her value and worth. Learned helplessness manifests in a similar fashion as spotlight anxiety where one comes to believe the dominant groups’ proscriptions about her relational possibilities, preventing any possibility of engaging in growth-full connections.

#### Patriarchy and the Social Construction of Single African American Mothers

I noted in chapter one that the HMI/AAHMI supports the ideology of patriarchal families. Like familism commitment to the nuclear family ideal, nuclear family arrangements are bolstered by the idealism of patriarchy as a social system with motherhood as a culturally constructed phenomenon. Feminist poet Adrienne Rich describes patriarchy as: “the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men — by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law, and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor — determine what part women shall or shall not play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male.”<sup>321</sup> Recognizing this definition was not quite applicable for African American women (and even less applicable for single African American mothers), womanist

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<sup>318</sup> Walker, “Critical thinking,” 55.

<sup>319</sup> Walker, “Critical thinking,” 55.

<sup>320</sup> Walker, “Critical thinking,” 55.

<sup>321</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Of woman born: motherhood as experience and institution* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 40.



theologian Dolores Williams argues,

To be congruent with the Afro-American woman's experience of oppression in this country, patriarchy would have to be defined as: ... the power of . . . [white men and white women]: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which [white men and white women]—by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education, and division of labor, determine what part [black women] shall or shall not play, and in which the [black female] is everywhere subsumed under the [white female] and white male.<sup>322</sup>

Womanist theologian Jacquelyn Grant calls patriarchy a *conceptual trap* ensnaring its victims and keeping them in place through the constant reinforcements of society that cooperate to keep the male status quo in place.<sup>323</sup> Practical theologian Pamela Couture has written on single mothers and welfare reform, and she notes that the standards of patriarchy devalue single African American mothers.

Patriarchy is a social system through which, as a group, men receive more power and privileges than women on the basis of gender, and which traditional male activities are valued more highly than traditionally female activities. These conditions are perpetuated through the norms and assumptions of economics, law custom, by threats or acts of physical and sexual coercion, and by restrictions placed on both women and men who try to live differently from the rules of patriarchy...Patriarchy in the family as been transformed as democratic values have influenced American family life.<sup>324</sup>

This ideology is also responsible for the proliferation of controlling images and is explored in the work of several womanist theologians.

I referred to Emilie Townes's work in this discussion. In *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, she argues that social policies function as systems of domination based on the production of dehumanizing images of African Americans.

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<sup>322</sup> Dolores S. Williams, "The color of feminism: or speaking the Black woman's tongue," *Journal of Religious Thought* 43, no. 1 (March 1986).

<sup>323</sup> Jacquelyn Grant, "Come to My Help, Lord, For I'm in Trouble": Womanist Jesus and the Mutual Struggle for Liberation," in *Reconstructing the Christ Symbol: Essays in Feminist Christology*, ed. Maryanne Stevens (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 131.

<sup>324</sup> Pamela D. Couture, "Rethinking Private and Public Patriarchy," in *Religion, feminism, and the family*, ed. Anne E. Carr and Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 249-50.

Townes understands that many policies have historically been used to reregulate black women's sexuality, and fertility. This operates with evil intent to "produce misery and suffering in relentlessly systematic and sublimely structural ways."<sup>325</sup> Writing on the roots of controlling images and public policy formation, with an emphasis on the *matriarch* and *welfare queen*, Townes contends that blaming poor African Americans for their plight and using African American women's imagined failure as mothers and wives, places classism, racism, and sexism into a tight, neat package that labels African American family structures deviant because they fall short of patriarchal assumptions about the family ideal.<sup>326</sup> Martha Fineman agrees with Townes as she argues that the impetus for supporting the institution of marriage and

reinforcing the historic control of fathers over children and in families hinges on casting the practices of single motherhood as "deviant." The impetus for this designation seems to be that the existence of unstigmatized mothers successfully mothering outside of the traditional heterosexual family calls into question of the basic components of patriarchal ideology. The very fact of their singleness is central to the construction of deviant mothers. Marital status is definitional---single motherhood is synonymous with deviant motherhood. This connection between singleness and deviancy is clear in the rhetoric used to generate and articulate the societal consequences associated with the increased numbers of single mothers.<sup>327</sup>

As I mentioned in chapter one, regardless of the circumstances in which single African American mothers parent alone, in a patriarchal society, she is considered deviant. The *real offence*—the *true* indicia of her pathology is her singleness. The pathological representation of single motherhood is inextricably linked to patriarchal ideology *and* cultural constructions of motherhood. Niara Sudarkasa, a scholar in African

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<sup>325</sup> Townes, *Womanist ethics and the cultural production of evil*, 12.

<sup>326</sup> Emilie M. Townes, "From Mammy to Welfare Queen: Images of Black Women in Public-Policy Formation," in *Beyond slavery: overcoming its religious and sexual legacies*, ed. Bernadette J. Brooten and Jacqueline L. Hazelton (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 65.

<sup>327</sup> Fineman, *The neutered mother*, 101.

studies and anthropology wrote numerous articles and books on African and African diaspora families. She explains that motherhood is “encased in culturally variable rules, regulations, expectations, and patterns of behavior.”<sup>328</sup> Even though giving birth and nurturing children is a natural and universal experience for women, it is not the only route to motherhood. Yet, according to Rich, regardless of the diversity of ways that women become mothers, motherhood in its idealized sense is twofold: “the biological potential or capacity to bear and nourish human life, and the magical power invested in women by men, whether in the form of Goddess-worship or the fear of being controlled and overwhelmed by women.”<sup>329</sup> In western culture, mothers are either idealized for their roles as family nurturers or blamed for the problems of their children. Ultimately, the ideal of motherhood that undergirds political and economic systems is dictated by a patriarchal social system that universalizes the roles, expectations, and behaviors of mothers as selfless subservient nurturers of their children and families. The ideal mother then is married to and yields social and economic power to her male husband.

Belief in a *natural and normal* family guides motherhood discourses. In fact, single motherhood is the official explanation for poverty.<sup>330</sup> In her chapter on deviant mothers, divorce, and welfare reform in *The Neutered Mother the Sexual Family and Other Twentieth Century Tragedies*, Fineman confirms that the articulated *problem* with divorced and impoverished mothers is the missing male and the solution is, in some form, “bring him back into the family.”<sup>331</sup> In reality, mothers who are poor, work outside of the

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<sup>328</sup> Niara Sudarkasa, "Conceptions of Motherhood in Nuclear and Extended Families, with Special Reference to Comparative Studies Involving African Societies," *Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies*, no. 5 (2003): 1.

<sup>329</sup> Rich, *Of woman born*, 13.

<sup>330</sup> Fineman, *The neutered mother*, 101-02

<sup>331</sup> Fineman, *The neutered mother*, 102.

home, or are outside of the narrow social boundaries of motherhood, like single mothers and lesbian mothers are considered problems.

I was struck by Fineman's questioning of society's acceptance of single motherhood as a pathological social disease. She explains that categorizing single mothers as deviant, regardless of the economic, social, or racial context in which motherhood occurs, is based in social acceptance of "saving the traditional family, not in providing for poor children and their caretakers."<sup>332</sup> As disheartening as it is to believe that preserving the patriarchal ideology of the family is more important than caring for disadvantaged families, this ideology is evident in welfare reform, discourses on same-sex marriage, and the HMI/AAHMI.

Even though the HMI/AAHMI is concerned about the well being of children, Fineman rightly points out that the research supporting nuclear families is more concerned with maintaining intact nuclear families by shaming single mothers and their children. Fineman made another interesting point about the public's acceptance of politically-driven deviancy discourse convinced the American people that their tax dollars should not be used to support lazy single mothers who refuse to work. Though single African American mothers are not the majority of single parents or on welfare, they are the public face of poverty and single motherhood.

Sociologist Dorothy Roberts, writing on the interrelated mutually supporting systems of racism and patriarchy for single African American mothers, contends that discourses on racism, patriarchy, and motherhood are organized around what Rich calls the experience of motherhood and motherhood as an enforced identity. The experience of motherhood is the relationship between a mother and her children and motherhood as an

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<sup>332</sup> Fineman, *The neutered mother*, 104.

enforced identity is the political institution that affects each woman's personal experience. An example of the latter is "visible in the male dispensation of birth control and abortion."<sup>333</sup> Both have profoundly affected the experience of single African American mothers. In her article *Racism and Patriarchy in the Meaning of Motherhood*, Roberts cites an example of African American motherhood from Regina Austin's article "Sapphire Bound!": "An unwed Black teenager, for example, may experience motherhood as a rare source of self-affirmation, while society deems her motherhood to be illegitimate and deviant."<sup>334</sup>

The irony of society's devaluing of single African American mothers according to patriarchal ideals is tied to the value of enslaved mothers. Their value was not based on their ability to experience motherhood as an affirmation of their humanity and God-given ability to give life. Motherhood for enslaved women was valued only as it benefited white slave owners. According to Roberts, although patriarchy made childbirth compulsory for enslaved women and white women, the value of the child was distinctively different:

Compulsory childbirth was a critical element of the oppression of both Black and white women of the time. A racist patriarchy requires that both Black and white women bear children, although these women served different and complementary functions. Black women produced children who were legally Black to replenish the master's supply of slaves. White women produced white children to continue the master's legacy.<sup>335</sup>

In the previous section, I discussed the role of controlling images in denigrating African American women's sexuality and fertility. Robert's article helps us trace this

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<sup>333</sup> Adrienne Rich, *On lies, secrets, and silence: selected prose, 1966-1978* (New York: Norton, 1979), 196.

<sup>334</sup> Regina Austin, "Sapphire Bound!," in *Applications of feminist legal theory to women's lives: sex, violence, work, and reproduction*, ed. D. Kelly Weisberg (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).

<sup>335</sup> Dorothy E. Roberts, "Racism and Patriarchy in the Meaning of Motherhood," *American University Journal of Gender, Social Policy & the Law* 1, no. 1 (1992): 8.

disdain of single African American mothers from slavery, when enslaved children were exploited for the economic benefits of the slavery and enslaved mothers had no legal right to their children. Enslaved mothers were only valued for labor, procreation, and, as Roberts points out, through the ideology of the *mammy*, for the care that they provided for their master's family and children.<sup>336</sup> Roberts chronicled the continued influence of patriarchal ideological standards and devaluing of single African American mothers versus white mothers through periods of forced sterilization and biased welfare laws where African American families were so heavily scrutinized that many children were placed in foster homes. Roberts explains:

The state intervenes more often in Black homes in part because Black mothers are more likely to be supervised by social workers, because children welfare workers apply culturally-biased standards to Black families, and because the state is more willing to intrude upon the autonomy of Black mothers. Government bureaucrats often mistake Black childrearing patterns as neglect when they diverge from the norm of the white nuclear family.<sup>337</sup>

Ideologically, the woman's role in the nuclear family is defined according to Victorian ideals about white middle-class mothers whose children are lauded for the contributions they make to society. This opposes attitudes toward single African American mothers who are thought to pass on values that lock children in the cycle of poverty, crime, and other behaviors that are a drain on society. As long as society continues to perpetuate these controlling images on single African American mothers, they "can never attain the ideal image of motherhood, no matter how much we conform to the middle-class convention, because as Roberts asserts, the ideal mother is white."<sup>338</sup> The biggest difference in the social construction of motherhood for African American

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<sup>336</sup> Roberts, "Racism and Patriarchy," 12.

<sup>337</sup> Roberts, "Racism and Patriarchy," 14.

<sup>338</sup> Roberts, "Racism and Patriarchy," 15.

and white mothers is “Black mothers must bear the incredible task of guarding their children’s identity against innumerable messages that brand them as less than human.”<sup>339</sup> Another important point Roberts makes about discourse on single African American mothers’ deviancy is the extent to which they are denigrated for departing from the norm of patriarchal and heterosexual marriage as a prerequisite for pregnancy. She asserts that it is,

questionable that marriage alone will transform Black women’s lives. For pregnant teenagers, marriage is actually correlated with “dropping out of school, having more babies, and ultimately being divorced or separated. Although fundamental social change is required, expanding women’s access to day care, low-income housing, nontraditional job markets, and health care are more viable short-term remedies for Black female poverty. Using both race and gender in deconstruction Black single motherhood clarifies that Black women’s welfare will not be improved simply by restoring the patriarchal family structure.”<sup>340</sup>

#### Single African American Mothers, Patriarchy, Heterosexism, and the Black Church

Womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas examined patriarchy and cultural trauma in *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*. Douglas agrees with Townes’ assertion that controlling images are especially harmful and dehumanizing to black women because they distort blackness and foster oppressive constructions of gender to maintain white power. Also, like Townes, but focusing on homosexuality and heterosexism, Douglas is concerned with the ways that African American people have internalized controlling images and the role that black churches have played in this internalization by perpetuating oppression in the form of theological silence around sex and sexuality.<sup>341</sup> Douglas refers mostly to same-gender-loving relationships and the HIV/AIDS epidemic; however the underlying theme of sex outside of marriage is the

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<sup>339</sup> Roberts, "Racism and Patriarchy," 5.

<sup>340</sup> Roberts, "Racism and Patriarchy," 27.

<sup>341</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black church: a womanist perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999).

experience of some single African American mothers, and a reality that many churches choose not to confront other than focusing on the external error of their ways because of their blatant participation in their own sin.<sup>342</sup>

African American women have had a tenuous relationship with the black church. On the one hand, for many African American women, their personal Christian faith and relationship to the black church helped them survive and resist cultural trauma. From a clinical perspective Greene acknowledges that spiritual and religious beliefs can be used to support behavior that reflect a theology of liberation for all members of Black religious communities that promote optimal mental health.<sup>343</sup> I found that seventy percent of the research participants' personal faith and/or their black church communities sustain them. For example, Sylvia said the church was crucial in helping her deal with her abusive marriage: "Going to church helped a whole lot. It helped more so than anything." Kenya says "I'm very active in my church and the word that I get there, um, it's just remarkable. It's always on point always relatable, um, so the times that I spend personally and the times I spend in church really keeps me accountable." For Erica, church was a safe place for her children to participate in activities and give her time to "live knowing they would be taken care of."

On the other hand, the black church is oppressive for African American women because it mirrors the same patriarchal ideologies that are present outside of its four walls. Greene notes that in the same way that theologies in black churches can be liberating,

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<sup>342</sup> Snorton, "The legacy of the African-American matriarch," 53.

<sup>343</sup> Beverly Greene, "African American Women, Religion, and Oppression: The Use and Abuse of Spiritual Beliefs," in *WomanSoul: the inner life of women's spirituality*, ed. Carole A. Rayburn and Lillian Comas-Díaz (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008), 153.



Those same beliefs can be used to support behaviors that constitute internalized oppression, racism, sexism, heterosexism, scapegoating, and isolation. They may be used to support the social status quo of dominance and subordination as well as individual and family pathology ... Religious and spiritual beliefs can be used in repressive ways to reinforce defensive styles that preclude emotional growth.<sup>344</sup>

Jones and Shorter-Gooden's empirical research found this dichotomous relationship with African American women and the black church:

But while our research shows that many women find their involvement with religious organizations to be nurturing and sustaining, it also reveals that too often Black women are asked to give up personal power in exchange for the spiritual sustenance and sense of community that they seek. They are asked to be quiet and deferential and to yield leadership to men. They are asked to deny parts of themselves—their ability to lead, to be analytical and critical, to do more than just settle into the pews and follow the flow of a service. The religious message itself is sometimes a disempowering one, relegating women to second-class citizenship. They're coerced to shift, to act "ladylike," to be submissive. They feel subtly, or not so subtly, put down by the church experience despite all of its spiritual offerings.<sup>345</sup>

These beliefs revolve around Christianity's gendered hierarchy subordinating women to men beginning with the anthropomorphizing of God as male and Father. In many biblical narratives, women were ancillary to men and often scapegoated, on the periphery, or silenced all together in favor of men. Patriarchy also permeates the New Testament, especially in relationship to marriage and family. Many pastors support biblical admonishments calling for wives to submit to their husbands. This type of gendered submission is evident in the nineteenth century Victorian-era family of an employed male head, wife as homemaker and children that came to represent the middle-class church family. Theologian Janet Fishburn notes "many people continue to think about sexuality, family and church in ways that took shape in the Victorian era..."<sup>346</sup> In

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<sup>344</sup> Greene, "African American Women, Religion, and Oppression," 153, 57.

<sup>345</sup> Jones and Shorter-Gooden, *Shifting*, 260.

<sup>346</sup> Janet Fishburn, *Confronting the idolatry of family: a new vision for the household of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 12.

light of changing demographics of families and ethical questions regarding the use of technology for procreation, Fishburn contends that one of the reasons many churches are struggling or are declining is their idolatry of the Victorian-era family and commitment to the family pew or the time when churches catered to the well being of nuclear families.

Even though there are single parent and blended families in most congregations today, many church members still imagine “the family pew” with a father, a mother, and several children there together on Sunday morning. If a congregation or its pastor visualizes membership in terms of this kind of family ideal, it is a sign of a culturally accommodated, domesticated faith. An unexamined commitment of pastors and people to values of “the family pew” is keeping Protestant churches from being able to offer spiritual formation for people from traditional and nontraditional families.<sup>347</sup>

Perhaps Douglas’ criticism of the black church’s propensity for “theological silence” on matters of sex and sexuality, regardless of the diversity of people and families in its pews, are actually conforming to a “family pew” theology. This means that pastors do not talk about sex since the norms say that the only people who are having sex are heterosexually married couples. Two of my research participants are lesbian single African American mothers and both prefer to cultivate their spiritual faith outside of church because they do not feel welcomed by churches from which they sought membership. Dorothy says that even though she was raised in a traditional black church, she no longer “believes in it because of “their feelings of gay people.” She did not elaborate about these feelings but her sentiments reflect the ways in which homophobia and heterosexism permeates black churches and unfortunately magnifies by her invisibility as a single African American mother *and* a lesbian. “Homophobia refers to the oppressive and bigoted attitudes and behaviors that Black people, as well as others, often direct toward gay and lesbian persons. Heterosexism signals the complex systems

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<sup>347</sup> Fishburn, *Confronting the idolatry of family*, 21.

and structures that privilege heterosexual orientations, while explicitly or implicitly penalizing same-sexed orientations.”<sup>348</sup> Douglas notes that lesbian sexuality is silenced beyond moral invectives and self-righteous assertions in black churches.<sup>349</sup> She adds that African American lesbians suffer to a greater extent because they are considered a threat to black masculinity. “This is in part due to the fact that the Black man’s quest for manhood, according to White patriarchal definitions, is threatened by the presence of Black lesbians.”<sup>350</sup>

Though the black family never had a monolithic, static, organized structure, sociologists have long credited the extended family as a crucial resource for the survival of African American people in slavery and even in our contemporary times. In fact, ninety percent of my research participants benefited from extended family support. According to practical theologian Wallace Smith, the black church functioned more as an extended family through consanguine or kinship support throughout the history of Africans in America.

The black church has always served as an extended family. It has always been to varying degrees a contemporary expression of the African consanguineal model. Within the church structure there are found both stable nuclear families and a variety of differing models. The variances may range from one-parent families in a nuclear arrangement to grandparents, uncles, aunts, or godparents serving as primary parents for youngsters outside of the nuclear grouping.<sup>351</sup>

Even so, Smith supports the nuclear family as the primary family model from which the church should be undergirded, although he believes that the nuclear family should be in community with others as all are linked through “shared pain, shared history, and shared

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<sup>348</sup> Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black church*, 7.

<sup>349</sup> Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black church*, 88.

<sup>350</sup> Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black church*, 104.

<sup>351</sup> Wallace Charles Smith, *The church in the life of the black family* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1985), 41.

hope of liberation.”<sup>352</sup> He agrees that the church must institute family enrichment programs to strengthen African American families. Smith argues, using biblical evidence, that a black-family-enrichment program must shore up the strength of the nuclear family because he believes that our culture does not have the support systems for anything much beyond the nuclear family.<sup>353</sup>

Despite his affirmation of extended families for helping African Americans survive, Smith adheres to the patriarchal ideal of the “family pew” as the model for strengthening African American families. He is also guilty of viewing all single African American mothers through deviance discourses. As I mentioned in chapter one, and as I demonstrated in chapter three and this chapter, single African American mothers are diverse. However, as the primary caregivers and the most prevalent family form in African American communities, all share a similar desire to be seen beyond controlling images so that their experiences are validated beyond deviance discourses.

### Summary

In this chapter, I examined cultural trauma in historical context. I focused on the controlling image aspect of cultural trauma, the ways that images can be internalized psychologically as oppression in the form of the *strong black woman*. I also discussed cultural trauma through relational cultural theory for its effects on the emotional and relational growth of single African American mothers that inhibit their ability to be vulnerably in growth-fostering relationships. Overall, I argued that patriarchy affects the experience of single African American mothers and the potential support they can receive from the religious communities where they find support. In the next chapter, I discuss

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<sup>352</sup> Smith, *The church in the life of the black family*, 41.

<sup>353</sup> Smith, *The church in the life of the black family*, 41.

single African American mothers' experience of relational trauma.

## Chapter 5

### 5. The Relational Context of Single African American Mothers

#### Relational Trauma

My faith and trust in and belief in God, it helped tremendously because one of the things that I guess when I...I finally came to the realization that we just were not going to get back together...you know cause I wanted a family the husband the wife and the kids that's what I wanted but it just wasn't working with this person and when I come to the realization of that, I cried three four days straight. Then I just asked God...then I'm like ok God I got these kids and if you don't send me somebody else...hmpf...to help me raise these kids...I got to raise these kids and I need your help. He never sent me anybody ...

Sylvia

#### Introduction

Cultural trauma is one layer (if that was not already enough) affecting the well being of single African American mothers. In most research on single African American mothers, there is little mention of the quality of their relationships, well being and quality of life. The research participants were very clear that their children were conceived in consensual intimate encounters with men they loved and or relied on for emotional and financial support. A plethora of research discussing the intricacies of African American male and female relationships is available, though that topic is beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, I raise the issues of male and female relationships because I contend that the emotional response to the losses incurred in these relationships is a source of pain and suffering covered by multifarious functions of strength.

In this chapter, I discuss components of and responses to relational trauma. First, I define relational trauma. I argue that the coping and resistance strategies described in the previous section have two functions: they help single African American mothers maintain a sense of humanity *and* they obscure pain and suffering of relational trauma. Next, I

discuss interpersonal violence, unusual and ambiguous loss and, finally, I discuss the impact of disenfranchised grief on the well being of single African American mothers.

### The Elements of Relational Trauma

Relational trauma was a prevalent theme among the research participants, as eight were physically or sexually abused. Half were physically and or emotionally abused while married. Four women were physically abused by boyfriends, a stepfather, and through date rape. Three of the married women recalled how abuse wrecked their self-esteem until they empowered themselves to leave. All the women described some form of loss, especially ambiguous loss, because they did not name their experiences as loss. However, evidence of ambiguous loss was there when they wondered why fathers did not want relationships with their children. The most poignant question I heard was “Why a man, who helped create a child, would not want anything to do with the child?” Some of the women wondered why their children’s fathers cared for other women or created other families.

In *Is Marriage for White People?: How the African American Marriage Decline Affects Everyone*, law professor Ralph Richard Banks suggests that fathers’ abandoning their children is not about the child but the father’s relationship with the mother.<sup>354</sup> He adds, in the case of marriage, the benefit of marriage for fathers is the connection to their children. Even with this connection, Banks points out that women typically mediate a child’s relationship with father and, depending on how the relationship ends, “whether the mother will continue to facilitate the father’s relationship with their children. The acrimony of separation, whether it involves divorce or simply the ending of the

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<sup>354</sup> Ralph Richard Banks, *Is marriage for white people?: how the African American marriage decline affects everyone* (New York: Dutton, 2011), 75.

relationship, can leave some women disinclined to do so.”<sup>355</sup> Another issue Banks raises is the consequences for children if fathers enter new relationships and mothers refuse to let fathers see their children. When this happens, some fathers are less inclined to support children financially. From all accounts the acrimony that Banks describes was evident, but the mothers who remained connected to their children’s fathers at some level seem to have made every attempt to facilitate the fathers’ relationships with their children. Unfortunately, I could not help them find the answers to their questions. I am convinced that they have wanted to ask such question but have never before had a captive listener who cared that their children were conceived during an intimate connection with a man. While I listened to their words, I heard pain and suffering. This is relational trauma: psychological or emotional trauma occurring in relationships.<sup>356</sup>

I defined relational trauma in chapter one as the emotional response to interpersonal violence and losses in interpersonal relationships. I contend that relational trauma can be characterized within betrayal trauma theory. Psychologist Jennifer Freyd developed betrayal trauma theory and defined it in *Betrayal Trauma: The Logic of Forgetting Childhood Abuse*, as, trauma that occurs when the people or institutions on which a person depends for survival significantly violate that person’s trust or well being.<sup>357</sup> Child, physical, emotional, or sexual abuses perpetrated by a caregiver are examples of betrayal trauma. The traumatic effect on survivors of betrayal trauma is impaired memory. That is, survivors, especially those abused as children, have amnesia or they deny that the abuse occurred. The foundation of betrayal trauma theory is

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<sup>355</sup> Banks, *Is marriage for white people?*, 76.

<sup>356</sup> Tian Dayton, *Emotional sobriety: from relationship trauma to resilience and balance* (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, 2007), xvii.

<sup>357</sup> Jennifer J Freyd, *Betrayal trauma: the logic of forgetting childhood abuse* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 9.



*betrayal* or a trust violation by someone upon whom a person relies for some aspect of living. Fryed writes, "All types of violence, abuse and oppression can have traumatic effects. However, trauma that occurs in the context of interpersonal relationships can be particularly detrimental because of the betrayal involved in the violation of basic assumptions of interpersonal and social relationships."<sup>358</sup> Betrayal trauma theory is important for this study because betrayal trauma *and* cultural trauma, with a particular focus on the betrayal of trust in single African American mothers' interpersonal relationships with the fathers of their children, are key sources of pain and suffering.

### Interpersonal Violence

Interpersonal violence or intimate violence is behavior within an intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological, or sexual harm. This type of behavior is known as intimate partner violence or domestic violence. It usually includes an ongoing pattern of behavior, attitudes, and beliefs in which a partner in an intimate relationship attempts to maintain coercive power and control. It produces fear and trauma in those who have been victimized. Examples of interpersonal violence are child abuse, incest, and spousal battery. Traci West offers a broader theory of intimate violence, including all harm inflicted on a woman's body regardless of the relationship with her perpetrator. For West all abuse is intimate:

Violence is labeled "intimate" either because of the character of the relationship between the attacker and the victim or the nature of the act. Therefore, stranger rape would still be considered intimate violence because sexual violation of a woman's body constitutes intimate violence regardless of whether or not the assault occurred within a chosen relationship of intimacy.<sup>359</sup>

Pastoral theologian Toinette Eugene notes that when African American women

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<sup>358</sup> Pamela J. Birrell and Jennifer J. Freyd, "Betrayal Trauma: Relational Models of Harm and Healing," *Journal of Trauma Practice* 5, no. 1 (2006): 50.

<sup>359</sup> West, *Wounds of the spirit*, 4.

experience interpersonal violence, they have an increased effect due to the trauma of racism or gender prejudice already present before the event and it remains even after the trauma.<sup>360</sup>

West contends, “the way African-American women feel about themselves and their environment is permanently altered by the incidence of intimate assault.”<sup>361</sup> She adds “deciphering the complex nature of this trauma involves naming and analyzing the emotional and spiritual repercussions of intimate violence because naming the effects of intimate violence helps to break down the perception that the male violence experienced by African American women is shameful and should be kept secret.”<sup>362</sup> West asserts that racial and gender oppression combine to shape the emotional and spiritual repercussion of African American women victim-survivors of intimate violence. She notes that invisibility and shame are dominant features of African American women’s experiences because the struggle for visibility occurs in the community’s response to intimate violence, the community’s reaction to the victim-survivor, and the victim-survivor’s perceptions of her selfhood.<sup>363</sup> These features result in the victim-survivor feeling estranged from her community.<sup>364</sup>

West understands that race defines and mediates the importance of community for most women. She explains that social isolation results when women are regulated to outsider status, which then infuses the trauma. The alienation produced by her membership in a simplistically characterized class of objectified “others” can buttress the

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<sup>360</sup> Toinette M. Eugene and James N. Poling, *Balm for Gilead: pastoral care for African American families experiencing abuse* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 55-59.

<sup>361</sup> West, *Wounds of the spirit*, 55.

<sup>362</sup> West, *Wounds of the spirit*, 55.

<sup>363</sup> West, *Wounds of the spirit*, 55-56.

<sup>364</sup> West, *Wounds of the spirit*, 59.

sense of disconnection from community already effected by the intimate violence. West notes that the suppression of selfhood is one of the most profound and complex areas in African American women's struggle for visibility. As a coping mechanism, they disassociate themselves from the traumatic experience as means of survival and to function with a degree of normalcy. This can establish a lifelong pattern of dutifully polarizing and silencing many of her emotional responses.<sup>365</sup>

Concerning the spiritual nature of interpersonal violence, Marie Fortune (focusing on sexual violence) defines interpersonal violence as sin because it violates the bodily integrity of another by "denying a person the choice to determine one's own boundaries and activities. Sexual violence violates another's personhood because it objectifies the other, making her a nonperson."<sup>366</sup> Pastoral theologian Kristen Leslie adds that interpersonal violence is the "violation of the Spirit of God incarnate in each of us."<sup>367</sup> West notes that African American women as *victim-survivors* of intimate violence experience religious and spiritual connection and disconnection, feeling God has abandoned and rejected them. Here, West refers to Marie Fortune's suggestion that Christian *victim-survivors* may feel alone and abandoned by God in the midst of their pain and suffering. She states this assessment by Fortune needs to be amended to include elements of racial subjugation that affect the life experiences of African American women. West adds that there can be a crisis of faith subsequent to intimate assault even if one does not hold that God protects from all pain and suffering.

In particular, in instances of intimate violation, a faith crisis may certainly arise

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<sup>365</sup> West, *Wounds of the spirit*, 60,67.

<sup>366</sup> Marie M. Fortune, *Sexual violence: the sin revisited* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005), 3.

<sup>367</sup> Kristen J. Leslie, *When violence is no stranger: pastoral counseling with survivors of acquaintance rape* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 4.

out of a dire need for God's protection. Yet, for women for whom socioeconomic and racist marginalization is a normal aspect of their daily lives, it is usually quite evident that God does not eliminate all the problems that these social realities bring. Many Christian African American women do not expect that faith in God will shield them from all encounters with pain and suffering. West asserts, for many of African American women, God is a refuge that enables them to survive in the midst of pain and suffering in spite of often overwhelming obstacles.<sup>368</sup>

### Unusual and Ambiguous Loss

Loss is another component of relational trauma. This includes loss of connection to another in failed relationships or divorce and loss related to idealized hopes, dreams, and expectations of self and other because of a failed relationship or bond with a significant other. These losses generally occur because of the relational context in which they are embedded. From birth, we rely on relationships for basic survival needs and as posited by relational cultural theory, this yearning for connection to others continues throughout our lifetime. Though our most basic connections are to people, Juneitta McCall acknowledges that we are also connected to objects, things, ideas, and dreams. She stresses the importance of agency in necessitating some connections over others.<sup>369</sup>

According to clinical psychologist Judith Virost, some losses are *necessary losses*:

When we think of loss we think of the loss, through death, of people we love. But loss is a far more encompassing theme in our life. For we lose not only through death, but also by leaving and being left, by changing and letting go and moving on. And our losses include not only our separations and departures from those we love, but our conscious and unconscious losses of romantic dreams, impossible expectations, illusions of freedom and power, illusions of safety— and the loss of our own younger self, the self that thought it always would be unwrinkled and

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<sup>368</sup> West, *Wounds of the spirit*, 60.

<sup>369</sup> Junieta Baker McCall, *Bereavement counseling: pastoral care for complicated grieving* (New York: Haworth Pastoral Press, 2004), 32.

invulnerable and immortal.<sup>370</sup>

We experience a profound sense of loss when we lose meaningful connections. Loss is commonly attributed to a significant other's death, but practical theologians Mitchell and Anderson caution that other forms of losses can "have a more profound impact on us in the long run."<sup>371</sup> In their very helpful text, *All Our Losses All our Grievs: Resources for Pastoral Care*, they call attention to six types of losses: material, relationship, intrapsychic loss, functional loss, role loss, and systemic loss. In her text *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief*, Psychologist Pauline Boss conceived a seventh type of loss, ambiguous loss. Most of the research participants have experienced six of the seven losses: material, relationship, intrapsychic, role loss, systemic loss, and ambiguous loss.

Mitchell and Anderson define material loss as, "the loss of a physical object or of familiar surrounding to which one has an important attachment."<sup>372</sup> Relationship loss is "ending of opportunities to relate oneself to, talk with, share experience with, make love to, touch, settle issues with, fight with, and otherwise be in emotional and or physical presence of a particular other human being."<sup>373</sup> "Intrapsychic loss is the experience of losing an emotionally important image of oneself, losing the possibilities of what might have been, abandonment of plans for a particular future, the dying of a dream. Although often related to external experiences, it is itself an entirely inward experience."<sup>374</sup> Role loss "is the loss of a specific social role or of one's accustomed place in a social

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<sup>370</sup> Judith Viorst, *Necessary losses: the loves, illusions, dependencies, and impossible expectations that all of us have to give Up in order to grow* (New York: Fireside, 1986), 15.

<sup>371</sup> Mitchell and Anderson, *All our losses, all our griefs*, 35.

<sup>372</sup> Mitchell and Anderson, *All our losses, all our griefs*, 36.

<sup>373</sup> Mitchell and Anderson, *All our losses, all our griefs*, 37-38.

<sup>374</sup> Mitchell and Anderson, *All our losses, all our griefs*, 39-40.

network.”<sup>375</sup> Systemic loss “involves changes in family systems, communities of faith, and other organizations. What is lost is the particular way in which a system functions.”<sup>376</sup>

In ambiguous loss theory, grief is essentially unresolved or frozen. Ambiguous losses are unclear, without closure, and they primarily occur in family systems where a significant other is either physically absent and psychologically present or physically present and psychologically absent. Pastoral theologian Rosalyn Karaban writes in *Complicated Losses, Difficult Deaths: A Practical Guide for Ministering to Grievers*, that ambiguous loss can be defined in three ways: “The loss is characterized by a lack of clarity or confusion surrounding the loss itself; there is no certainty of exactly what is happening, or when the uncertainty may end; and the event of the loss is clear, but the perception of the loss is unclear; and the loss is unclear because it is not recognized, accepted, supported, validated, or ritualized by society.”<sup>377</sup>

I referred to Pinderhughes’ research on slave trauma, grief, loss, and intergenerational trauma throughout this study. In *Ambiguous Loss*, Boss contends that slaves routinely experienced ambiguous losses that may be connected to subsequent flexible African American family forms:

The American legacy of ambiguous loss also has a traumatic social history-the uprooting of Africans who were brought by force to the shores of the United States and sold off with little concern for preserving marriages and families... Given this history of resilience in the face of traumatic ambiguous losses, it is no wonder that contemporary African American families define family with less rigid boundaries than those with European roots.<sup>378</sup>

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<sup>375</sup> Mitchell and Anderson, *All our losses, all our griefs*, 42.

<sup>376</sup> Mitchell and Anderson, *All our losses, all our griefs*, 44.

<sup>377</sup> Rosalyn Karaban, *Complicated losses, difficult deaths: a practical guide for ministering to grievers* (San Jose, CA: Resource Publications, 2000), Kindle Electronic Edition: Location 218.

<sup>378</sup> Pauline Boss, *Ambiguous loss: learning to live with unresolved grief* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 29-30.

Boss says, "Of all the losses experienced in personal relationships, ambiguous loss is the most devastating because it remains unclear, indeterminate."<sup>379</sup>

### Disenfranchised Loss and Grief

When someone has experienced some form of traumatic or complicated loss, the appropriate steps are to remember, grieve, and heal in a safe place. In some literature, there is a distinction between mourning and grieving, however, in the context of this study, I use the term grief. Grief is the psychological, behavioral, social, physical, and spiritual response to a significant loss. It is complicated by the relationship to the person or the object lost and can be accompanied by feelings of guilt, shame, profound sadness, despair, or helplessness.<sup>380</sup> Experiences of grief can be healthy or unhealthy. Persons experiencing healthy grief acknowledge and express emotions related to loss ideally within a mutually empathetic relationship with others. Unhealthy grief occurs when loss is unacknowledged and or suppressed.

Some researchers assume there is a universal grief response. However, practical theologian Candice Shields and Paul Rosenblatt and Beverley Wallace's research on African American grief argue that there is no universal grief response. In other words, they argue that mitigating factors like culture, gender, and race influences the grieving process. They also note that sometimes African American grief stems from trauma,<sup>381</sup> and is particularly associated with violence, health issues, injustice, loss of relationships, loss of community, loss of dignity, and racism.<sup>382</sup> Rosenblatt and Wallace's noted that for

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<sup>379</sup> Boss, *Ambiguous loss*, 5-6.

<sup>380</sup> Mitchell and Anderson, *All our losses, all our griefs*, 40.

<sup>381</sup> Paul C. Rosenblatt and Beverly R. Wallace, *African American grief* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 50-51.

<sup>382</sup> Candace Charlene Shields, "'Ain't got time to die': Grief, loss and healing in the African

African Americans, “more often than not, racism is implicated in African American experiences of loss and, by extension, in how African Americans grieve and cope with the loss. Thus, racism and oppression on the African American experience must therefore be considered in understanding grief and loss experiences.”<sup>383</sup> Shield’s concludes, in her dissertation research on grief, loss, and healing, “African Americans suffer from grief in a different way than any other ethnic group, but without available outlets for grief. African Americans can have lingering complications from grief...I contend that African American grief is lingering within many African Americans and is not being brought to a full positive resolution.”<sup>384</sup>

I recall the ways that some enslaved women processed the myriad of losses they incurred. Williams examined family separation in slavery. She explains that owners disregarded bonding experiences, feelings of attachment, and loss.

Practices of sale and purchase varied, but for enslaved people, the single most important fact was that owners had the power to decide what they would do with the people they owned. They decided whom and when to sell. They decided which children would be sold with their mothers and which would be separated. They decided whether to keep families together or to ignore familial bonds, and their actions held great consequences for enslaved people. Every death of an owner, every auction, and every sale portended separation for the enslaved child and parents; every transaction could bring about loss and grief.<sup>385</sup>

In addition, enslaved mothers cared for children and significant others without the security of family. Harriett Jacobs recalls mothers who witnessed children taken away.

On one of these sale days, I saw a mother lead seven children to the auction-block. She knew that some of them would be taken from her; but they took all. The children were sold to a slave-trader, and their mother was brought by a man in her own town. Before night her children were all far away. She begged the trader to tell her where he intended to take them; this he refused to do. How could

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American community" (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, School of Theology, 2009), 38.

<sup>383</sup> Rosenblatt and Wallace, *African American grief*, 51.

<sup>384</sup> Shields, "'Ain't got time to die'," 40.

<sup>385</sup> Williams, *Help me to find my people*, 25.



he, when he knew he would sell them, one by one, wherever he could command the highest price? I met that mother in the street, and her wild, haggard face lives to-day in my mind. She wrung her hands in anguish, and exclaimed, "Gone! All gone! Why don't God kill me?" I had no words wherewith to comfort her. Instances of this kind are of daily, yea, of hourly occurrence.<sup>386</sup>

This display of emotion contradicts slave-owners belief that enslaved females were void of emotion. Historian Nell Painter reminds us that slaves were people with all the psychological characteristics of human beings, with childhoods and adult identities formed during youthful interaction with others.<sup>387</sup> Williams offers some insight on the raw emotion of enslaved women. One such vignette offers a glimpse of another gut-wrenching episode of loss and grief:

Delia Garlic, a freedwoman, recalls: "Babies was snatched from their mothers' breasts and sold to speculators. Children were separated from sisters and brothers and never saw each other again. Course they cry; you think they not cry when they was sold like cattle? I could tell you about it all day, but even then you couldn't guess the awfulness of it."<sup>388</sup>

She concludes, by reading slave narratives and newspaper ads that sought lost loved ones,

offer clear evidence of deep pain on the part of those who lost family members, and they also suggest that the expression of this pain in the presence of whites was sometimes muted, silenced, or buried because whites would not tolerate it, and perhaps also because blacks thought that expressing their grief openly would avail them nothing. The emotions, then, appear to fit into what may be called a universal model, but local restrictions sometimes limited their expression. To further complicate the analysis, enslaved people lived their lives both in the presence and out of the sight and hearing of whites. How they wept and grieved and hoped in their cabins, in their quarters, and in their hearts could never be completely controlled by their owners. These slave narratives and the interviews of former slaves provide the most sustained accounts of separation and its repercussions.<sup>389</sup>

Even still, white slave masters constricted female slave's emotions. Often this natural

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<sup>386</sup> Harriet Jacobs, *The deeper wrong, or, Incidents in the life of a slave girl* (London: W. Tweedie, 1862).

<sup>387</sup> Nell Irvin Painter, *Soul murder and slavery* (Waco: Markham Press Fund, Baylor University Press, 1995), 10.

<sup>388</sup> Williams, *Help me to find my people*, 21.

<sup>389</sup> Williams, *Help me to find my people*, 4.

display of emotion was limited and even cut off if a woman or her children grieved too long in the owner's presence. Painter adds that parents and owners taught slave children to quash their anger when they were beaten because anger was a forbidden emotion for slaves to display before owners.<sup>390</sup> Williams refers to this social denial of the right to grieve disenfranchised grief.

Kenneth Doka developed the theory of disenfranchised grief. Disenfranchised grief occurs when an individual's grief is unrecognized or unacknowledged by another; the grieving person lacks opportunities to express their emotions; they receive diminished social support and sympathy from others; or they may be deprived of opportunities to participate in mourning rituals. Doka adds two aspects to disenfranchised grief: intersocial and intrapsychic. At the social level, "disenfranchisement can occur when a society inhibits grief by establishing grieving norms that deny such emotions to persons deemed to have insignificant losses, insignificant relationships, or an insignificant capacity to grieve."<sup>391</sup> When the individual tries to process their grief, "they may experience a deep sense of shame about the relationship or they may experience emotions, perhaps reflecting societal norms that inhibit the grieving process."<sup>392</sup> For example, some of the research participants experienced relational trauma in cohabitating relationships, "friends with benefits" relationships, and an extra-marital affair. These are examples of relational losses not socially sanctioned, especially in religious institutions.

Disenfranchised grief is predicated on "grieving norms" that regulate who can and cannot grieve and what they can and cannot grieve. These "grieving rules," specify "who,

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<sup>390</sup> Painter, *Soul murder and slavery*, 24.

<sup>391</sup> Doka, *Disenfranchised grief*, xv.

<sup>392</sup> Doka, *Disenfranchised grief*, 4.

when, where, how, how long, and for whom people should grieve.<sup>393</sup> The rules are embedded in laws, policies, and grieving rituals. For example, employees are given time off for immediate family members but would not be allowed to take bereavement time for a best friend or a pet. Doka describes disenfranchised grief as a paradox of sorts wherein the griever experiences normal grief emotions of anger, guilt, and sadness but the dynamics of disenfranchisement complicate the grieving process and in fact can exacerbate and intensify emotional reactions to loss. I noted in chapter one that the theory of disenfranchised grief is particularly salient for single African American mothers primarily because the relational losses they have experienced are not socially sanctioned or validated. I argue that this is definitely the case in religious communities. For example, it is unlikely that others will acknowledge a single mother who is grieving because her daughter has no relationship with her father in church.

Another element of disenfranchised grief is the process of self-disenfranchisement. On the one hand, disenfranchised grief cannot be openly acknowledged. On the other hand, the self can initiate the process of disenfranchisement when one is an active agent in suppressing grief. Psychologist Jeffrey Kauffman explains,

The power of social disenfranchisement is vested in this psychological agent, who disallows grief by withholding recognition of loss. In self-disenfranchising grief, oneself is not only disenfranchised (the object of disenfranchisement) but also disenfranchising, Self. As the psychological subject of disenfranchised grief, is giver and receiver, an agent compelled to carry out its own disenfranchisement. Self delivers and receives on behalf of society a message such as "Do not allow this grief to be real for you. This is not a loss: it is not grief." Self enforces and abides by the order disallowing grief.<sup>394</sup>

Further, Kauffman argues that allowing and disallowing are functions shame as a

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<sup>393</sup> Doka, *Disenfranchised grief*, 4.

<sup>394</sup> Jeffrey Kauffman, "The Psychology of Disenfranchised Grief: Liberation, Shame, and Self-Disenfranchisement," in *Disenfranchised grief: new directions, challenges, and strategies for practice*, ed. Kenneth J. Doka (Champaign, IL: Research Press, 2002), 61.

“psychological regulator or gate keeper of experience.”<sup>395</sup> He explains, “In disenfranchised grief, shame is the psychological force that prevents the experience of grief from occurring and that may outright foreclose the experience of grief. Exposure is the essence of shame. Others words that convey the meaning of shame are embarrassment, humiliation, unworthiness, and being uncovered in the gaze of another.”<sup>396</sup> Kauffman adds that “shame can also denote discretion, modesty, and being covered—the cover that safeguards and nurtures our humanity.”<sup>397</sup>

Shame aids the process by which controlling images are internalized by single African American mothers. Melissa Harris-Perry’s discussion of shame in *Sister Citizen* helps to explain why shame functions as a barrier for grief. Using psychological research, she describes three elements of shame. First, shame is social:

Individuals feel shamed in response to a real or imagined audience. We do not feel shame in isolation, only when we transgress a social boundary or break a community expectation. Our internal moral guide may lead us to feel guilt, but shame comes when we fear exposure and evaluation by others. This may be especially true for girls and women, who draw a larger sense of self-identity from their friendly, familial, and romantic relationships.<sup>398</sup>

The second element is global:

It causes us not only to evaluate our actions but to make a judgment about our whole selves. A person may feel guilty about a specific incident but still feel that she is a good person. Shame is more diffuse: it extends beyond a single incident and becomes an evaluation of the self.<sup>399</sup>

Finally, shame brings a psychological and physical urge to withdraw, submit, or appease others.<sup>400</sup> At first glance, it could be argued that all of us are susceptible to one or more

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<sup>395</sup> Kauffman, "The Psychology of Disenfranchised Grief," 63.

<sup>396</sup> Kauffman, "The Psychology of Disenfranchised Grief," 67.

<sup>397</sup> Kauffman, "The Psychology of Disenfranchised Grief," 67.

<sup>398</sup> Harris-Perry, *Sister citizen*, 94.

<sup>399</sup> Harris-Perry, *Sister citizen*, 94.

<sup>400</sup> Harris-Perry, *Sister citizen*, 94.

elements of shame; however Harris-Perry contends that African American women and especially single African American mothers, by virtue of cultural and relational trauma, are apt to experience shame more frequently than others because of stigmatized identities and life circumstances.<sup>401</sup> She points out that “racial shaming is deployed to enforce hierarchy, sustain inequality, and create scapegoats.”<sup>402</sup> Harris-Perry describes a function of shame that Kauffman notes in the process of self-disenfranchisement, which works as a moral compass regulating thoughts and behaviors. She explains,

Because shame is connected to collective rules and shared expectations, it is a basic tool by which societies create moral order. Individuals fear the harsh judgments of their families, friends, and communities, so they present themselves as aligned with external norms. Shame works through real or anticipated social sanctions that punish violations of group rules and thus helps us stay within the lines of acceptable behavior and thought.<sup>403</sup>

Underlying shame is guilt. Guilt is an emotion that arises when one feels that they have violated a personal value or moral standard. This moral compass or “internal moral guide may lead us to feel guilt, but shame comes when we fear exposure and evaluation by others.”<sup>404</sup> Kauffman explains the role of guilt in disenfranchised grief:

A person may be predisposed not to experience guilt. He or she may believe that to feel guilt is to be overwhelmed or annihilated by its accusation. When a loss occurs, the person who is prone to shame about guilt is prone to experience loss as a signifying guilt, thus initiating a self-disenfranchisement of grief over loss.<sup>405</sup>

Harris-Perry noted that African American women are especially predisposed to guilt because the strong black woman is typically the primary caregiver for her children and other family members. Many of the research participants expressed guilt for not having enough time with their children or spoiling their children too much. The guilt is

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<sup>401</sup> Harris-Perry, *Sister citizen*, 94.

<sup>402</sup> Harris-Perry, *Sister citizen*, 94.

<sup>403</sup> Harris-Perry, *Sister citizen*, 104.

<sup>404</sup> Harris-Perry, *Sister citizen*, 104.

<sup>405</sup> Kauffman, “The Psychology of Disenfranchised Grief,” 72.

internalized, thus affecting their self-esteem and self-worth as mothers. It is a loss of the idolized *strong black woman*. The ruling power of disenfranchising grief means that a loss is not recognized as loss, it is not realized as grief.<sup>406</sup> Kauffman makes an important point about disenfranchised grief that I believe is inherently spiritual. That is, whether one's permission to grieve is regulated by social or internal forces, the movement towards enfranchisement results in freedom and liberation.

The very articulation of the concept of disenfranchised grief bears within itself the spirit of freedom: Psychologically, the very articulation of the concept aims at freedom from bondage to grief that is not socially recognized. Acknowledging that grief exists gives sanction or legitimacy to grieving. Giving and withholding recognition of grief sets in motion a psychoeconomics of disenfranchised grief: an economy of allowing and disallowing, of yes and no, of freedom from bondage to unrecognized grief. Permission to grieve, in freeing up the experience of loss and the possibility of mourning, is psychospiritual liberation. Freedom from the mute and invisible violence of unrecognized grief allows mourning to do its integrative work.<sup>407</sup>

Disenfranchised grief hides pain and suffering and is yet another outcome of embodying the *strong black woman*. Kauffman recognizing that liberation is a necessary movement in the grieving process is instructive for the well being of single African American mothers. He explains,

Liberation means being allowed to grieve; however, this is not what freedom is generally believed to be. Liberation from grief, not liberation to grief, is universally recognized to be freedom. This argument is controversial because by proposing that grief, not the end of grief, is liberating, it turns an obvious and certain reality, the primacy of the pleasure principle, on its head. The reader must not mistake the argument here: that disenfranchised grief is about liberation to grieve and that grief is a means to an end (liberation from grief), not itself the site of liberation. Receiving permission to grieve is liberation.<sup>408</sup>

If single African American mothers are to experience this kind of liberation, then their ability to heal from relational trauma is dependent on being able to grieve and to be

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<sup>406</sup> Harris-Perry, *Sister citizen*, 104.

<sup>407</sup> Kauffman, "The Psychology of Disenfranchised Grief," 62.

<sup>408</sup> Kauffman, "The Psychology of Disenfranchised Grief," 66.

understood as having experienced a meaningful and legitimate loss of everything personally connected to the fathers of their children. Unfortunately, the kind of empathy that validates this kind of loss and, in turn, gives single African American mothers the freedom to grieve, heal, and move on is wrapped up in the violation of cultural conventions about proper relationships for conceiving and nurturing children. In other words, for single African American mothers, regardless of the circumstances in which they find themselves parenting alone, the “right to grieve” is not allowed for self-inflicted pain. This means that they cannot grieve losses that they brought on themselves. A pastoral care approach for this kind of liberation as a precursor for healing relational trauma is therefore a two-step process: The first step understands the complications inherent in the loss and grief that has been disenfranchised and the second step is understanding grief inflicted by disenfranchisement.<sup>409</sup> Kauffman explains,

Being disenfranchised is itself a loss, a loss that is a narcissistic injury to one’s self-regard and how one experiences, values, secures, and defines oneself. Disenfranchisement is an injury that blocks the possibility of mourning; self is turned inward, wishing repair, but instead attacks itself with its worthlessness.<sup>410</sup>

I amend this, suggesting that attacks of worthlessness for single African American mothers are first external, thus forcing the *self* inward because if there is no external validation of the loss, one subsumes that neither they nor their loss matters. Pastoral care and counseling then necessarily concerns itself with the grief of both relational trauma *and* cultural trauma.

### The Black Church and Relational Trauma

In the previous chapter, I noted Kelly Brown Douglas’ charge of “theological silence” in some black churches because they refuse to openly address interpersonal

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<sup>409</sup> Kauffman, "The Psychology of Disenfranchised Grief," 66.

<sup>410</sup> Kauffman, "The Psychology of Disenfranchised Grief," 63.

violence in the lives of men and women in their communities. Many churches (not limited to black churches) also fail to acknowledge the magnitude of loss and grief outside of death. Citing research from Mitchell and Anderson, I mentioned that other losses in people's lives are actually more common than losses to death. This means that many people, especially single African American mothers, are living with pain and suffering without the support of their pastors and church communities. When one's pain and suffering is expressed, many black churches respond with explanations that espouse theologies that often are harmful, oppressive, and detrimental to one's well being and quality of life. It is imperative to understand how these theologies are operative to make healing possible in the lives and interpersonal relationships of single African American mothers.

This section explores pain and suffering in the context of black church liberation and womanist theologies. I do this in two subsections. First, I discuss pain and suffering from a pastoral psychological perspective because, from that perspective, according to pastoral theologian Pamela Cooper-White, pain and suffering is "the starting point for all pastoral and practical theology."<sup>411</sup> Theologian Jürgen Moltmann calls suffering "the open wound of life in this world."<sup>412</sup> He writes in *The Trinity and the Kingdom: the Doctrine of God* that as we try to make sense of experiences that cause suffering, the real task of faith and theology is "to make it possible for us to survive, to go on living, with this open wound."<sup>413</sup> In the second subsection, I discuss black and womanist theologies of atonement that are often used to justify suffering.

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<sup>411</sup> Pamela Cooper-White, "Suffering," in *The Wiley-Blackwell companion to practical theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 23.

<sup>412</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the kingdom: the doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 49.

<sup>413</sup> Moltmann, *The Trinity and the kingdom: the doctrine of God*, 49.



## Pastoral and Psychological Perspectives on Pain and Suffering

I used both terms—pain and suffering—throughout this study to describe the outcome of cultural and relational trauma. Cooper-White defines pain as a measured, and qualified mental, physical, or emotional condition and suffering as “the meaning that we make, or attempt to make, of our pain.”<sup>414</sup> I use these definitions to explain pain *and* suffering as two distinct emotional outcomes of relational and cultural trauma. For this study, I also find womanist theologian M. Shaw Copeland’s definition of suffering helpful. She says suffering is

the disturbance of our inner tranquility caused by physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual forces that we grasp as jeopardizing our lives, our very existence...Suffering always means pain, disruption, separation, and incompleteness. It can render us powerless and mute, push us to the borders of hopelessness and despair. Suffering can main, wither, and cripple the heart...<sup>415</sup>

However, the distinction between pain and suffering is that the meaning of suffering is not conveyed in pain alone. It entails

an ongoingness and a bearing-with entwined with the passage of time or the subjective experience of time... suffering conveys a level of symbolization, of expressiveness, that pain does not ... Indeed, suffering requires consciousness, and with consciousness, symbolization and a rendering of pain into some meaningful articulation – a word, a cry, a narrative, even a pleading look into the eyes of another.<sup>416</sup>

On the other the other hand, unexpressed pain, or pain that is too overwhelming for expression, is internalized. Pain is the physical, emotional, or spiritual response to trauma. Thus, in order for us to make meaning of suffering, the painful experience must be connected to its pre-dissociative source, articulated, and understood by a caring other.

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<sup>414</sup> Cooper-White, "Suffering," 25.

<sup>415</sup> M. Shawn Copeland, "'Wading through Many Sorrows': Toward a Theology of Suffering in Womanist Perspective," in *A Troubling in my soul: womanist perspectives on evil and suffering*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (Mayknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 109.

<sup>416</sup> Cooper-White, "Suffering," 25-26.

Cooper-White explains,

Traumatic experience is walled off, broken into its different aspects (e.g., bodily sensation, emotion, and thought), without normal narrative links to make sense of what happened. Traumatic experience is therefore “unformulated.” ...When our pain, particularly intense pain, is not received and understood by an empathic other, the body-mind reacts to trauma through the mental process of dissociation, in which knowledge is kept out of awareness as an unconscious defense against the terror of being totally overwhelmed or annihilated. Nonverbal enactment then becomes the only mode by which this unformulated experience can communicate.<sup>417</sup>

In the process of sharing our suffering with caring others, healing can take place.

However, Cooper-White explains that for healing to take place, “we must make meaning in relation to our pain, incorporating our values, spiritual beliefs, hopes, fears, anger, sorrow, and a narrative sense of what has happened, is happening, and is going to happen.”<sup>418</sup>

Silence is a primary deterrent for single African American mothers in healing relational trauma. Even though the black church provides a safe space for many African American women to testify about the goodness of God, Jesus Christ’s presence in their suffering (in the context of African American historical survival), and “making a way out of no way,”<sup>419</sup> like Douglas argues, there is an eerie silence around sex, sexuality and, I want to emphasize, relational trauma. Womanist France E. Wood writes in Townes’s edited volume, *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, that African American Christianity is characterized by both the liberating message of Jesus Christ and an overt silence on African American women’s experience of

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<sup>417</sup> Cooper-White, “Suffering,” 25.

<sup>418</sup> Cooper-White, “Suffering,” 26.

<sup>419</sup> Monica A. Coleman, *Making a way out of no way: a womanist theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 12. “The concept of “making a way out of no way” articulates black women’s relationships with God as they navigate the reality of their lives in the pursuit of wholeness and justice.”

oppression.<sup>420</sup>

### Silence and Suffering

Losses incurred in relational trauma, unlike loss attributed to death, are often not openly acknowledged. At least in death, especially death of family members, most Christians can find a supportive pastor and church community through special prayers, funeral services, and post-death bereavement support, as necessary. Religious communities are usually the first place grieving persons go, except in the case of those whose losses, like those of single African American mothers, are disenfranchised. Losses that produce pain and suffering and remain silenced, both by the person experiencing the loss and the church community, are those associated with divorce, suicide, homosexual relationships, pregnancy loss, hidden losses such as those engulfed in substance abuse or incarceration, and any losses incurred in intimate relationships not sanctioned by the church (especially extramarital affairs). Many of these losses remain silent and contribute to suffering because of the moral and theological positions churches embrace, ostensibly to order the lives of their parishioners.

Choice is another reason why silence persists about the types of losses that many single African American mothers have incurred in relational trauma that turn into disenfranchised grief. According to pastoral counselor Dale Kuhn, these losses make empathetic responses difficult when it is based on a life-style choice or when one bears personal responsibility for the loss.<sup>421</sup> Some examples of losses due to personal

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<sup>420</sup> Frances E. Wood, "'Take My Yoke upon You': The Role of the Church in the Oppression of African-American women," in *A Troubling in my soul: womanist perspectives on evil and suffering*, ed. Emilie M. Townes (Mayknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 39.

<sup>421</sup> Dale R. Kuhn, "A Pastoral Counselor Looks at Silence as a Factor in Disenfranchised Grief," in *Disenfranchised grief: new directions, challenges, and strategies for practice*, ed. Kenneth J. Doka (Champaign, IL: Research Press, 2002), 121.

responsibility are addictions to drugs and alcohol. An important point that Kuhn makes related to acknowledging relational trauma in the lives of single African American mothers is patriarchal assumptions about family and interpersonal relationships. He argues, like Fishburn's "family pew" metaphor, that "religious groups understand family, and family is a metaphor often used to describe the relationships in a particular congregation...If the loss cannot be understood in that family context, it is much more difficult for this religious group to respond."<sup>422</sup> Another point Kuhn makes is about self-imposed silencing because, if the caring culture of a religious community does not openly acknowledge complicated or ambiguous losses, griever remain silent and assume that no one cares or no one can deal with their grief issue. In my earlier discussion about shame, this silence further exasperates shame in individuals. Kuhn explains,

A cycle of silence is established when there is an unusual loss. If the loss does not fit the common experience of the religious community, the individual griever often self-imposes a silence to hide any personal discomfort about the lost object or with the way the object was lost. This silence is then reinforced by a communal silence—in this case, the silence of the congregation—because the community does not find out about the loss or feels just as uncomfortable about it as the individual does. The communal silence sparks shame or guilt in the griever of the loss. At times, the grieving person or the one who has died is blamed for making bad choices. This perceived culpability gives the person all the more reason not to grieve openly and reinforces the desire to keep everything quiet. The result is that the person ends up never dealing with the loss of the loved one, dealing instead with the shame or embarrassment of being different.<sup>423</sup>

Silencing is also enacted through theological justifications for suffering or, as Wood notes, by idealizing and romanticizing single African American mothers' strength, when we elevate their actual suffering to a form of martyrdom (for the cause of others) that virtually guarantees that it will remain unexamined."<sup>424</sup> Many African American

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<sup>422</sup> Kuhn, "Disenfranchised grief," 121.

<sup>423</sup> Kuhn, "Disenfranchised grief," 123.

<sup>424</sup> Wood, "'Take My Yoke upon You'," 39.

women have accepted long-held explanations for suffering to explain questions of theodicy or the attempt to defend the goodness of God against evil. This is often done at the expense of their health and well being. The common explanation preached and or accepted in many black churches is the theology of the cross of atonement theology. It holds that suffering is redemptive and valuable because the crucifixion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ atoned for the fall of Adam and Eve.<sup>425</sup> Salvation is based on soteriological claims of forgiveness for sins that are reconciled back to God for everlasting life. This equates to preachers admonishing the mostly African American women in their churches to “bear the cross.” Thus, my understanding of suffering for single African American mothers is informed by womanist theological perspectives that call for a critical engagement with atonement theologies that oppress African American women.

### Summary

In this chapter, I examined relational trauma, arguing that cultural images have an effect on single African American mothers’ articulation of and grief response to the various losses they have incurred in relationship with their children’s fathers in the form of disenfranchised grief. I also found embodying the *strong black woman* prevents single African American mothers from acknowledging grief and loss from relational trauma for two reasons: society supports the ideology of the *strong black woman* through controlling images and by advocating the patriarchal ideal of family as necessary for raising children. I concluded that guilt and shame works as a form of self-disenfranchisement preventing some single African American mothers from feeling worthy to grieve losses. In the next chapter, I construct a womanist practical theology of connection to delineate theological

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<sup>425</sup> Genesis 3:1-24.

justifications for a black church inclusive ministry for providing pastoral care and counseling to single African American mothers.

## Chapter 6

### 6. A Womanist Practical Theology of Connection

#### Attending to the Well Being of Single African American Mothers

##### Introduction

In chapters four and five, I examined the effect of cultural and relational trauma on the well being and quality of life of single African American mothers. In chapter four, I argued that single African American mothers suffer from cultural trauma, primarily because they are subjected to the proliferation of dehumanizing controlling images. I explained that one of the ways that single African American mothers resist controlling images is by embodying the *strong black woman*. They do so to maintain their humanity, but I argue that embodying this controlling image effects their ability to experience a level of vulnerability and authenticity necessary for mutually empathic and empowering growth-fostering relationship, which, according to relational cultural theory, is the key to life satisfaction.

In chapter five, I discussed relational trauma and disenfranchised grief. I concluded that disenfranchisement of grief arises when single African American mothers internalize controlling images influenced by “grieving rules” that determine their “right to grieve” relational losses. I concluded that healing for single African American mothers necessarily includes liberation from the myriad of ways that controlling images affect their sense of self and response to relationship loss.

In this chapter, I propose a womanist pastoral theology of connection for attending to the well being and ensuring the quality of life for single African American mothers. In the first section, I describe the theological foundation for the model using the narrative of Jesus Christ’s encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well in the Gospel

of John, chapter four. I contend that this encounter demonstrates a womanist pastoral theology of connection that serves as a model for the black church to provide safe, supportive, and sacred spaces for single African American mothers to heal and enfranchise their grief; and embrace more enlivening images that counter oppressive controlling images rooted in patriarchal views about single African American motherhood. In the second section, I describe the process of enfranchisement of disenfranchised grief. In the third section, I describe the process of embracing more enlivening images of self, God, and African American motherhood. In the fourth and final section, I offer a family theology that welcomes single African American mothers and their children.

#### Theological Reflection: Jesus and the Woman at the Well

I am an African-American Christian ordained woman minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Though my identity as a African-American Christian woman informs my ministry practice more than my denominational affiliation and authorization, I emphasize it here because I am aware that the women, who are the overwhelming majority in many of our churches, can benefit from the increased visibility of ordained women in their denominations. Many women in congregations are mothers, and most, I contend, though I do not have empirically validated statistics to confirm my argument, are suffering from cultural and relational trauma. As demonstrated by my research participants, many are not members of churches because they are disenfranchised for being single mothers and or in other ways have lifestyles not sanctioned and supported by many black churches. They are all managing their lives and families in spite of negative perceptions about single African American mothers and their



suppressed and disassociated loss and grief. This affects their well being, quality-of-life, and interpersonal relationships.

The concepts of cultural and relational trauma that we have explored—controlling images, interpersonal violence, unusual and ambiguous loss, and disenfranchised grief—are not explicitly biblical concepts. However, meanings associated with these terms are evident when the layers of people's lives are closely and critically analyzed in many narratives throughout the Bible. For example, womanists have found resonance with the life of Hagar when she became a prominent figure in the Genesis story of Abraham and his wife Sarah's challenges with conceiving an heir.<sup>426</sup> Most traditional biblical scholars focused on Sarah's infertility and her handing over her insignificant slave Hagar as a surrogate. Womanist Dolores Williams centralized Hagar's life because it is similar to African American women's experience in chattel slavery.<sup>427</sup> In concert with this study, Williams also finds similarities with Hagar's plight as a single African American mother.<sup>428</sup>

Williams also highlights her survival-quality-of-life model that secured Hagar's quality-of-life and well being, the well being of her son Ishmael, and hope the well being of future generations of her people. That is, Williams argues that God made it possible for Hagar to secure a hopeful future and quality-of-life because God provided her with the resources for her liberation. She uses the term quality-of-life to refer to "persons, families and/or communities attempting to arrive at well-being through the use of, search for and/or creation of supportive spiritual, economic, political, legal, or educational

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<sup>426</sup> Genesis 16, 17, and 21.

<sup>427</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the wilderness*, 3, 33.

<sup>428</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the wilderness*, 246.

resources.”<sup>429</sup> Williams says, “The Genesis 21 narrative suggests that Hagar and Ishmael fared well, because God was with the child as he grew. Both the Genesis 16 and 21 narratives reveal the faith, hope, and struggle with which African slave woman worked through issues of survival, surrogacy, motherhood, rape, homelessness, and economic and sexual oppression.”<sup>430</sup> If Hagar can secure a liberated future for herself and her son after enduring a myriad of suffering, so too can single African American mothers.

I am grateful for Williams’s critical exegesis of this text because it is a model for survival, quality-of-life, and well being from a resource, existential and social justice perspective. It affirms that liberation for single African American mothers is possible. Indeed, God can make a way out of no way. As one of my research participants affirmed, “God provides!” However, I am aware that womanist theology largely focuses on survival, liberation, and wholeness from a socio-political and religious-cultural perspective.<sup>431</sup> In attending to the well being of single African American mothers, we must attend to intrapersonal and interpersonal perspectives to reach the survival, liberation and wholeness of which most womanist theologians speak. I affirm Sheppard’s contention that “we must listen to the interior of a person not only to transform distorted self-images but also to transform distorted theories that perpetuate them.”<sup>432</sup>

I assert that wholeness is predicated on well being in the areas delineated by Howard Clinebell: spiritual, psychological, physical, relational, vocational, recreational, and ecological. In other words, I am interested in survival and liberation not only from a

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<sup>429</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the wilderness*, 246.

<sup>430</sup> Williams, *Sisters in the wilderness*, 33.

<sup>431</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, “Womanist Theology: What is its Relationship to Black Theology?,” in *Black theology: a documentary history volume two, 1980-1992*, ed. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, vol. 2 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 292.

<sup>432</sup> Phillis Isabella Sheppard, *Self, culture, and others in womanist practical theology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 9.

social-cultural-religious perspective but wholeness in all areas of life. This experience of wholeness is possible through healthy interpersonal connections demonstrated by the relational cultural theory tenets of authenticity, vulnerability, mutuality, and a reframing of strength. For single African American mothers, wholeness can be realized when they liberate themselves from controlling images that force them into unhealthy notions of strength and when they begin to process and heal their grief. This is achieved in healthy relationship. A model for this type of relationship is Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well in the fourth chapter of the Gospel of John.

Hagar is one of many disenfranchised and marginalized women in the bible who until they had a divine encounter with God, accepted their fate without much resistance to the societal rules enforced by men. In the New Testament, Jesus consistently challenged and liberated women from rules that oppressed, ostracized, and disenfranchised them. He accepted them in their present condition and he liberated and healed them into new lives and new hopes. In relationship with Jesus, the women he encountered were humanized because he spoke to and defended them in public. One of the most notable disenfranchised women is the Samaritan woman who came to draw water from a well. She encountered a tired and thirsty Jesus during his stop at the well in Sychar, on his way to Galilee.<sup>433</sup> Jesus asked for a drink and she refused, citing cultural norms outlawing Jews from speaking to Samaritans. Jesus' peculiar response invites the unnamed woman to see him as more than a stranger, to focus on more than literal water. She questions his invitation, again focused on literal water and his human limitations to secure the water. Jesus tells her that those who drink living water will never thirst because the water that he offers is of eternal life.

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<sup>433</sup> John 4:3-42

Again, the woman's response is with a literal understanding, that living water eliminates thirst and the chore of having to retrieve drinking water for her village. Instead of fulfilling her request for literal water, Jesus asks her to bring her husband to the well. She responds, stating that although she is living with a man, he is not her husband. Jesus not only confirms her present relational predicament—he reminds her of her five previous failed relationships. According to Clinebell, this kind of confrontation can help people change when they experience the pain of their present behavior.<sup>434</sup> For pastoral care givers, it is akin to speaking the truth in love, which Jesus exhibited towards marginalized people throughout his ministry. Clinebell notes that Jesus' model of confrontation is essential for growth.

Growth occurs in any relationship when one experiences both accepting love and honest confrontation. Movement toward greater wholeness is nurtured in us when someone cares enough to speak the truth in love to us. This enables us to experience something of both the love that does not need to be earned (grace) and caring honesty (judgment) that confronts us with the ways we are hurting ourselves or others. Healing love—the muscular love that brings together caring and confrontation—is essential in all pastoral care and counseling! This principle is what I call the 'growth formula.' Jesus' way of relating to persons embodied this formula. He cared deeply but with confronting honesty for all kinds of people, including society's powerless rejects—sinners, psychotics, the sick, the poor. He related to them in terms of what they could become as well as what they were. He saw them through the glasses of growth and thus helped them grow.<sup>435</sup>

Ironically, instead of focusing on the immense loss, she honors his prophetic insight—his ability to see the despair in her life, but chooses to talk about cultural norms about worship. Jesus plays along with her aversion tactics to not only reveal that he is the Messiah she expected but to liberate her from her rigid relationship with God. She returns to her village, transformed, open, authentic, and excited about her new life. She tells her

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<sup>434</sup> Clinebell, *Basic types of pastoral care & counseling*, 144.

<sup>435</sup> Clinebell, *Basic types of pastoral care & counseling*, 56.

people, “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did.”<sup>436</sup>

New Testament scholars do not know much about the woman. She is known only as the “woman at the well.” What is surmised about her life is derived from the historical and cultural context of Samaritan people. Pure Jewish people despised them because they were a mixed race of Jewish and Pagan ancestry. Scholars believe the woman was an outcast from her own community because of her relationship with men. She is also considered an outcast because she retrieves water alone at noon during the hottest time of the day. Women normally drew water together during cooler times of day. She has been called a prostitute, though that claim cannot be substantiated because the narrative is unclear about the nature of her relationships. She has also been perceived as a woman who cannot keep a man. Most of the attention she receives focuses on the error of her ways rather than her yearning for healthy relationships. The marriage customs, ethics, and laws that ordered the relational lives of the Samaritan people makes an assessment of her life. What is clear about her life is that she is not married to her current man and she has had five failed relationships. This is significant in her conversation with Jesus. Jesus enfranchises her disenfranchised grief and loss by naming her loss and her need for connection in the patriarchal cultural in which she lived.

I contend that the Samaritan woman’s relational encounter with Jesus demonstrates the attending that is necessary by caregivers for the well being of single African American mothers. This encounter is also a model of self-care for single African American mothers to attend to their own well being. Relational cultural theory contends that healing and wholeness occurs in growth fostering relationships where there is empathy, mutuality, authenticity, and vulnerability. This is the precursor for well being in

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<sup>436</sup> John 4:29 (NRSV).

all areas of life, especially in interpersonal relationships. The Samaritan women and Jesus meet when they are vulnerable. Jesus, in the throngs of his humanity, is tired and thirsty. She avoids judgment and ridicule from her community when she comes to the well during the hottest part of the day. They have a mutual encounter, he asks for water to quench his physical thirst, and he offers her living water to quench her relational thirst.

The Samaritan woman initially rebuked Jesus' invitation for living water because either she misunderstood his offer or she refused to confront her pain. A relentless Jesus encouraged her to be authentic—to be honest about her marginalized and disenfranchised state. Missing the point yet again, she is encouraged to see God, the source of living water, beyond cultural and religious boundaries. Jesus did not use his knowledge about her life for condemnation or to admonish her to sin no more. Instead, he expressed concern for her well being and offered her hope for a better life. "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life."<sup>437</sup>

This relational encounter with Jesus transformed her from a life mired in hopelessness, to a hope-filled life "that believes the future is filled with possibilities and offers a blessing."<sup>438</sup> Andrew Lester notes that theologically hope "describes a person's trusting anticipation of the future based on an understanding of God who is trustworthy and who calls us into an open-ended future. This God keeps promises of deliverance, liberation, and salvation."<sup>439</sup> The outcome of this relational encounter is through hope,

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<sup>437</sup> John 4:13-14 (NRSV).

<sup>438</sup> Andrew D. Lester, *Hope in pastoral care and counseling* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 62.

<sup>439</sup> Lester, *Hope in pastoral care and counseling*, 62.

Jesus enfranchised her by naming her real human need for connection. Jesus raises her consciousness about who she can become. This invites her to embody a healthier self-image and a healthier image of God when she no longer sees God as rule maker but life giver. This model attends to the well being of single African American mothers by creating safe relational spaces for enfranchising loss and grief as a pathway to embody the hope that results in healthier images of God and self.

### Enfranchising Loss and Grief

The first imperative for attending to the well being of single African American mothers is enfranchising their grief. The journey of enfranchising loss and grief begins when single African American mothers are humanized rather than objectified by patriarchal, cultural, and religious norms that oppress them by veiling their relational experiences of pain and suffering. Mitchell and Anderson suggest that the “abnormality of grief is frequently a consequence of the refusal to grieve or the inability of the grieving person to find those willing to care.”<sup>440</sup> I contend that this *caring* is a three-step process: evoking internal and communal empathy, naming the loss, and honoring disenfranchised loss and grief through ritual.

### Evoking Communal and Self Empathy

The first step entails evoking self-empathy and communal empathy. Empathy is an important aspect of pastoral care, which seeks to integrate the psychological and religious dynamics of empathy. Psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut defined empathy as “vicarious introspection...the capacity to think and feel oneself into the inner life of another person”<sup>441</sup> and “our lifelong ability to experience what another person

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<sup>440</sup> Mitchell and Anderson, *All our losses, all our griefs*, 18.

<sup>441</sup> Heinz Kohut, Arnold Goldberg, and Paul E. Stepansky, *How does analysis cure?* (Chicago:

experiences.”<sup>442</sup> In RCT, empathy is a “complex cognitive-affective skill that involves the ability to join with another in his or her experience, while maintaining cognitive clarity about the source of the arousal.”<sup>443</sup> I privilege the RCT perspective on empathy because it takes empathy a step forward to mutual empathy. Mutual empathy is a two way process that is central to movement towards growth-fostering relationship. That is, in mutual empathy, each person in a caring relationship is moved by each other’s experience.

In the context of caregiving, Mitchell and Anderson wisely explain that “empathy involves getting outside of our own feelings enough to attend to another’s experiencing, to feel another’s anguish as distinct from our own even when it resembles our own. Empathy requires us to hear and receive what another human being is feeling and saying.”<sup>444</sup> Doehring explains that empathy is an important aspect of pastoral care because it describes the divine dynamics of a transcendent being entering into human suffering.<sup>445</sup> For Cooper-White, empathy is an aspect of *witnessing* because the practice of witnessing another’s pain is sacred and it could be the first genuinely empathic witness that an individual has ever experienced.”<sup>446</sup> Witnessing then is profoundly theological and essential for one’s ability to vicariously experience or join with another’s experience of suffering. Pastoral psychologist Chris Schlauch asserts that caregivers have a responsibility to act empathically because an empathetic style of care reflects our being

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University of Chicago Press, 2013), 82.

<sup>442</sup> Kohut, Goldberg, and Stepansky, *How does analysis cure?*, 82.

<sup>443</sup> Walker and Rosen, *How connections heal*, 10.

<sup>444</sup> Mitchell and Anderson, *All our losses, all our griefs*, 119.

<sup>445</sup> Carrie Doehring, *The practice of pastoral care: a postmodern approach* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 20.

<sup>446</sup> Cooper-White, "Suffering," 29.



made in the image of God—an expression of the *imago Dei*.<sup>447</sup>

### From Silence to Voice: Naming Loss

Naming disenfranchised loss is important for enfranchising grief in single African American mothers. Jesus demonstrates this by removing the veil covering the Samaritan woman's loss of five husbands. Jesus' loving confrontation validated her as a person and her experience of loss so that healing can begin. Naming loss also requires that caregivers are aware of the various types of losses. Mitchell and Anderson argued that the variability of loss occurs more than the most common form of loss, death. When grieverers in religious communities are aware and encouraged to openly share their suffering, then naming the various losses we experience will likely eliminate silent grieverers. In fact, Kelly argues that "ministers and faith communities have a particular responsibility to ensure that no grieving persons in their midst go unrecognized and unsupported."<sup>448</sup> Pastors can facilitate expressions grief in single African American mothers by becoming familiar with how they embody the various types of losses and symptoms of complicated grief. Pastors can integrate this knowledge by cultivating a safe community that normalizes their particular losses through biblical passages on lament or in sermons and religious education. Citing Jesus' blessing to mourners in Matthew 5:4, Kelly provided ministers with guiding questions to help them understand their potential to disenfranchise losses in their faith communities:

In Matthew 5:4, we hear Jesus' all-embracing words of solace, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." Jesus did not single out certain groups of mourners as deserving comfort. He blessed all those who grieve. As the hands and feet of Christ on earth, so must we do. In order not to disenfranchise the grief of

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<sup>447</sup> Chris R. Schlauch, "Empathy as the essence of pastoral psychotherapy," *Journal of Pastoral Care* 44, no. 1 (March 1990): 17.

<sup>448</sup> Melissa M. Kelley, *Grief: contemporary theory and the practice of ministry* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 12.

others, we must regularly ask ourselves these critical questions: Whose losses do we notice? Whose grief do we support? Whose grief might we ignore, invalidate, or minimize?<sup>449</sup>

Kuhn notes that faith communities are natural places for people to mourn. As is often offered the experience of families receiving support for the death of their loved ones, the congregation is uniquely positioned to support disenfranchised grievers. At is best, the congregations and congregational leaders can provide a safe-enough place for grievers to turn.<sup>450</sup> This means that black churches must be familiar with each member's unique experience of loss and grieve so that *all* types of loss are honored and ritualized.

#### Honoring Disenfranchised Loss and Grief through Ritual

Another way of enfranchising loss and grief in single African American mothers after a culture of caring empathy is established in the faith community that honors and acknowledges all losses, is ritualizing those losses. A practical theology of well being for single African American mothers affirms worship as a form of ritual. Here we are called to bring our authentic selves to the worship experience. Rituals evolve in response to transition or change in order to manage the powerful feelings aroused by loss.<sup>451</sup> Elaine Ramshaw, a professor of pastoral care, calls ritual "a way to establish order, to reaffirm meaning, to bond community, to handle ambivalence, and to encounter mystery."<sup>452</sup> In *Caring Liturgies: The Pastoral Power of Christian Ritual*, Susan Smith describes five reasons for rituals in churches: "to enable human growth and maturity; to help people through many and particular times of suffering and times of transition; the role of the churches is to learn, teach, and practice the conducting of such rites; the church has a

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<sup>449</sup> Kelley, *Grief*, 13.

<sup>450</sup> Kuhn, "Disenfranchised grief," 121.

<sup>451</sup> Mitchell and Anderson, *All our losses, all our griefs*, 139.

<sup>452</sup> Elaine Ramshaw, *Ritual and pastoral care* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 22.

tradition of creating rites as part of a process of conversion in faith and growth in Christ; and Christian ritual makers are responsible to cultivate competence in order to create holy rituals that are liberating and life giving.”<sup>453</sup> All are important, however, enabling human growth, maturity and helping people through suffering and times of transition are significant for attending to the well being of single African American mothers. According to Smith, churches should be intentional about rituals for growth and maturity to help all members grown spiritually, psychologically, socially, and intellectually for the sake of their identity in Christ.<sup>454</sup> Rituals that provide life-giving messages for Christ-like growth and opportunities for validating and transcending the suffering that emerges from the challenges of parenting alone are ongoing sources of healing and liberation for single African American mothers to live into the fullness of humanity modeled by Jesus Christ.

Doka defines ritual as highly symbolic acts that confer transcendent significance and meaning on certain life events or experiences.<sup>455</sup> Mitchell and Anderson categorize rituals into beginnings and endings. A wedding is a ritual of beginning, and a funeral is a common ritual for endings. Doka contends that ritual can address disenfranchisement on all levels: with the self, with others with society at large, and even with our sense of God. He extends Mitchell and Anderson’s rituals of beginnings and endings to include rituals of continuity, transition, reconciliation, and affirmation. Rituals of continuity honor the ongoing presence of a deceased loved one or a significant loss that calls for regular remembrance. Rituals of transition mark a change or movement since the loss

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<sup>453</sup> Smith Susan Marie, *Caring Liturgies: The Pastoral Power of Christian Ritual* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 8-14.

<sup>454</sup> Smith Susan Marie, *Caring Liturgies*, 8.

<sup>455</sup> Kenneth J. Doka, "The Role of Ritual in the Treatment of Disenfranchised Grief," in *Disenfranchised grief: new directions, challenges, and strategies for practice*, ed. Kenneth J. Doka (Champaign, IL: Research Press, 2002), 135.

experience.<sup>456</sup> Rituals of reconciliation allow a person to offer or accept forgiveness or to complete some degree of unfinished business.<sup>457</sup> Finally, rituals of affirmation allow individuals to affirm the loss and to say thank you for the legacies they have received from the deceased or lost person or lessons learned from the experience.<sup>458</sup>

Doka makes an important point about rituals: they always emerge from a person's loss narrative. This is important because narratives are particular and unique so rituals honoring loss should reflect the uniqueness of the persons' story or loss rather than rote rituals that are administered as a one-size-fits all. Ramshaw adds that the pastor's responsibility is not to create a living liturgy single-handedly. Rather, the "pastor's role is to assist in the people's creative task, through her knowledge of the church's liturgical tradition and the people's ritual needs."<sup>459</sup> A poignant example of a ritual ending and affirmation that can be a source for single African American mothers is depicted in the documentary, *For the bible tells me so*. In it, Bishop Eugene Robinson, a retired Bishop in the Episcopal Church, describes participating in a ritual of ending and affirmation with his former wife. They divorced because he acknowledged that he is gay. The ceremony marked the end of their marriage along with both making a commitment to remain friends and supportive parents to their two daughters.

### Enlivening Images of Single African American Motherhood

#### Embracing Life-Giving Womanist Self Images and God Images

A womanist practical theology of connection for single African American mothers includes helping them embrace a renewed sense of self and God. A healthy self-

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<sup>456</sup> Doka, "Disenfranchised grief," 144.

<sup>457</sup> Doka, "Disenfranchised grief," 145.

<sup>458</sup> Doka, "Disenfranchised grief," 145.

<sup>459</sup> Ramshaw, *Ritual and pastoral care*, 22.

image is essential for single African American mothers who openly to resist controlling images by defending them against false and oppressive notions of notions of strength. Embracing nurturing images of God is also important for Single African American mothers. Pastoral counselor Cynthia Stone emphasizes that “God images are constructed out of personal and cultural contexts. Expressing ultimate value and meaning, they are inevitably connected to self-images.”<sup>460</sup>

The construction of images of God, like the construction of images of self and other, arises from a mix of interpersonal relationships, cultural context, language, and the personal unconscious. Like the image of the idealized parent, or ego ideal, the image or images of God held consciously or unconsciously are repositories of ultimate value and meaning.<sup>461</sup>

The power to self-define self and God speaks to power dynamics involved in rejecting controlling images of single African American mothers and solely patriarchal images of God. Collins explains this dynamic for controlling images.

The insistence on Black women’s self-definitions reframes the entire dialogue from one of protesting the technical accuracy of an image—namely, refuting the Black matriarchy thesis—to one stressing the power dynamics underlying the very process of definition itself. By insisting on self-definition, Black women question not only what has been said about African-American women but the credibility and the intentions of those possessing the power to define. When Black women define ourselves, we clearly reject the assumption that those in positions granting them the authority to interpret our reality are entitled to do so. Regardless of the actual content of Black women’s self-definitions, the act of insisting on Black female self-definition validates Black women’s power as human subjects.<sup>462</sup>

Self-definition is enhanced by one’s understanding of God as being made in the image and likeness of God. While likeness includes the diversity of human creation—male and female, in many black churches, God is referred to only as *Father, He, and Him*.

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<sup>460</sup> Cynthia Stone, “Liberating Images of God,” in *The Image of God and the Psychology of Religion*, ed. Richard Dayringer and David Oler (New York: Haworth Press, 2004), 1-2.

<sup>461</sup> Stone, “Liberating Images of God,” 4.

<sup>462</sup> Collins, *Black feminist thought*, 114-15.

Rejection entails not discounting the masculine metaphors about God but broadening one's image of God to more life-giving attributes such a nurturer, comforter, and guides.<sup>463</sup>

### Embracing Motherhood as Continuum of Life and Communal Practice

Ironically, in light of what we have found in the case of single African American mothers, mothers are valued in the African American community. In spite of the imposition of controlling images, it is generally understood that African American mothers are the glue that holds the African American community together. Mothers hold also hold a prominent place in womanist thought. Williams explains that motherhood is emphasized in womanist thought and in Alice Walker's emphasis on mothers in her definition of womanist. Motherhood also transcends biological mothers to include *other mothers*, *church mothers*, and *community mothers*. These concepts were derived from the West African practices of motherhood where mothering was the responsibility of the village.

More enlivening image of mothers can be incorporated in worship and by pastors who emphasize that the church is an interdependent community more like the true village is espouses it to be. That is, mothers should be reminded that the church is a supportive In this way, some of the isolation and shame that single African American mothers feel can be ameliorated when the church proves to be a genuine supportive community. This can be realized through a womanist family theology for the African American church.

### A Womanist Practical Theology of Family Ministry

The Black church has historically been a source of strength and support for African American families. During slavery, slaves were not allowed to openly worship

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<sup>463</sup> Williams, "Womanist Theology," 68.

God apart from the oppressive God that was imposed on them by their white Christian slave masters. In spite of this, they formed the invisible institution in the “hush harbors,” or the secret places of worship where African religious practices were mixed with the Christian religion taught by slave masters. We know that constant separations prevented neat nuclear family arrangements. This meant that the hush-harbor churches included *everyone* in the life of the church. This model of church needs to be resurrected because single African American mothers and other marginalized groups can and do go to church, but black churches, who have clear biblical convictions about sin and centrality of the nuclear families, make it difficult for them to fully participate in the life of the church.

Unfortunately, some black churches’ adoption of conservative theologies about families and interpersonal relationships has regressed from supporting everyone to oppressing many whose families do not neatly conform to societal norms about families. Biblical Scholar Cain Hope Felder asserts that the black churches erroneously embraced conservative theological positions about African American families on faulty yet popular proof-texting approaches to biblical exegesis arguing that many preachers tend to pick and choose biblical texts that suit their own tastes and personal values, without making much attempt to reflect critically on how these values often only mirror their own narrow socialization.<sup>464</sup> Jack Balswick, a Professor of Sociology and Family Development and Judith Balswick, Professor of Marital and Family Therapy, say this proof-texting is akin to “stripping,” arguing that these faulty views ignore historical and cultural contexts about families.<sup>465</sup>

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<sup>464</sup> Cain Hope Felder, *Troubling biblical waters: race, class, and family* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 154.

<sup>465</sup> Jack O. Balswick and Judith K. Balswick, *The family: a Christian perspective on the contemporary home*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 17.

Nevertheless, like several of my research participants have attested, the African American church has value for many single African American mothers. Practical theologian Phillis Sheppard contends that even though many African American churches are oppressive, many go because they believe their basic needs are being met in the context of community, in relationship with pastoral authority, and through liturgical experience.<sup>466</sup> This may be true for some, but many women who attend black churches, especially single African American mothers, are unable to articulate their needs. Indeed, some no longer attend because they have a sense of what church ought to be even though they may not be able to specifically state what they need.

A few examples of the ought-ness of church were expressed by Juanita, Dorothy, and Ann. They were apart of church communities in the past but choose not to attend at this point in their lives. As a former active Muslim, Juanita says she left because she felt that she was asked to fit into a “category.” She feels that people in religious communities “look down on you unless you’re married, divorced or widowed.” Dorothy says, “I don’t like to go to traditional churches because I think they are phony.” She added that she does not feel “traditional churches” support gay and lesbians and “I don’t think the church does anything to help single mothers I think they are stuck in what ever their beliefs are. They still look at it [single parenting] as a negative thing.” Ann says when she went to church, “people were very mean or they were there for show or they were there to make you feel bad about your life.” She became discouraged because the pastor of her former church had “all of these women.” She also described frustration with church teachings that did not give her a “full understanding of what it means” for her life and being among people in church “who were all dressed up and they had their hats and they had their

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<sup>466</sup> Sheppard, *Self, culture, and others*, 27.



Benzes and I'm here to learn about the word. How can I be better?"

The thoughts and feelings shared by the women indicate that they experienced *pseudocommunities* but wanted *real* community. According to Margaret Kornfeld, pseudocommunities appear as genuine communities because they seem friendly but in reality are,

“not places where members are safe to be different, to disagree, to question the program, or the leadership of the group. Members who do not reflect the group are in fact shunned, sometimes in subtle ways. Conflict is either not allowed or there is no effective mechanism for resolving it. People are not valued for their differences or uniqueness. The group is exclusive rather than inclusive.”<sup>467</sup>

In contrast, members in *real* communities feel *at home* because you can be yourself, warts and all ... You don't feel pressured to be in the group, you feel free to be there, and free when you are there. In that community, you experience grace.<sup>468</sup>

I highlight the early African American church because it is an important historical reminder and resource for constructing a womanist practical theology of family. Even though womanist theologians have written very little about family and interpersonal relationships, what has been written offers several guidelines for constructing a practical theology of family ministry that represents the fullness of God's relational desires for creation and is welcoming and supportive of *all* at the diverse stages of families and relationships in all facets of ministry. Three aspects of womanist theology guide my model: First, as Baker-Fletcher notes, in a womanist approach, God is social: womanist theology is concerned with both who God is in relation to God's self and who God is in relation to creation; and, God is divine community whose aim is for authentic community

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<sup>467</sup> Margaret Kornfeld, *Cultivating wholeness: a guide to care and counseling in faith communities* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 18-19.

<sup>468</sup> Kornfeld, *Cultivating wholeness*, 19.

on earth as in heaven.<sup>469</sup> Secondly, the theme of family and relationships runs through Walker's definition of womanist: mothers relating to daughters; women relating to other woman and men; women in relationship with creation, God, community, and self. Finally, the womanist conviction of being "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female"<sup>470</sup> is also a mandate for the church. Thus, a womanist practical theology of family ministry reflects God's wisdom for all forms of African American families and interpersonal relationships, value and support all people and relationships within the movement of life's beginnings and endings, and ensure that the church's ministry is a safer space for intentional healing and growth.

#### A Relational God: Theological Foundations of Family

My theological foundation of a family ministry begins with the relationships of the Triune God--the interrelationship of God, Jesus, and Spirit. The trinity models relational mutuality and interdependence. I believe this is God's design for human relationships. Indeed, we are the *imago dei*, representing the diversity of God's creation and God's relationship to humankind. To this end, I am in agreement with Balswick and Balswick that the Trinity models a theology of family beings. Human beings are created by a relational Triune God to be in significant and fulfilling relationships ... this relationality is the primary way humans reflect God's image.<sup>471</sup> Ultimately, all of God's creation has value.

#### We Are All Family

Some New Testament scholars argue that the concept of family values informing

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<sup>469</sup> Karen Baker-Fletcher, *Dancing with God: the Trinity from a womanist perspective* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2006), ix.

<sup>470</sup> Walker, *In search of our mothers' gardens*, xi.

<sup>471</sup> Balswick and Balswick, *The family*, 18.

many family theologies is not biblically based. “Applying family values to the single-parent home must begin with accepting, valuing, and supporting each family member. As evident in the research, children and single parents suffer most in an isolated family system. A biblical ethic of family must include the mandate that each member in society is to be cared for—that truly none must be left behind.”<sup>472</sup> Further, contrary to what many believe about Jesus’ family theology, there is consensus among many New Testament scholars that Jesus’ definition of family was not limited to biological family members. Family for Jesus includes, “whoever does God’s will.”<sup>473</sup> Felder contends, “Jesus’ teachings fundamentally center on the vision of the Kingdom of God as a new Household ... the Bible “endorses the extended family model and even supplements it with a kind of fictive kinship.”<sup>474</sup> In fact, Felder goes even further to suggest that the New Testament is primarily concerned with the quality of relationships, as evidenced by the lack of a monolithic or static view of family life.

Within the Bible, we do not find a monolithic, static view of family life. Rather, we find changing attitudes, values, and practices as God’s Word seeks expression in diverse ancient cultural settings, I will suggest that while the nuclear family is commendable in some respects, neither in biblical times nor today can discussion of family life be restricted to the nuclear family model. Furthermore, ... the New Testament has a distinct concern for greater priority on quality relationships in the household, which emerges as a theological paradigm for membership in the Household of God.<sup>475</sup>

African American theologian J. Deotis Roberts describes *family* as the most intimate unit of human relationships. He explains that family is a kinship of persons who have entered into an agreement to love and care for one another across sexual and often generational lines and he argues that families are a more comprehensive unit that included married

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<sup>472</sup> Balswick and Balswick, *The family*, 317.

<sup>473</sup> Mark 3:31-35 (NIV)

<sup>474</sup> Felder, *Troubling biblical waters*, 150.

<sup>475</sup> Felder, *Troubling biblical waters*, 151.

couple and their children and families of married, divorced, and widowed single parents.<sup>476</sup> He argues that we must minister to the human situation as it is-not as we would like it to be or as it used to be.<sup>477</sup>

### An Inclusive Family Ministry

Christian family scholar Dennis Guernsey, defines family ministry as, the church's empowering the people of God to relate to one another as if they are family, especially if they are."<sup>478</sup> He asserts that family in this sense is an action word describing how we related rather than who we are when we relate. This perspective on family ministry is exemplified in *Tending the Flock: Congregations and Family Ministry*, where case studies were conducted on nine diverse congregations for their theological and practical approaches to family ministry. The editors noted that while each congregation's approach was unique in its ethnic and socioeconomic make-up, four markers permeated each case study, and these areas are instructive for ministries that could support single African American mothers. First, families are provided for as families rather than individuals. They are also located within a broader moral and religious community. Second, resources grounded in an integrated psychological, religious, and moral framework is provided for learning the emotional skills necessary for sustaining intimate relationships and to restore the self when intimate relationships fail. Specific ministries help persons develop the emotional skills needed to sustain and renew intimate relationships and deal with the emotional, moral, and financial realities of their lives when intimate relationships fail. Third, significant ministries emphasize socialization and

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<sup>476</sup> J. Deotis Roberts, *Roots of a Black future: family and church* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), 69.

<sup>477</sup> Roberts, *Roots of a Black future*, 104.

<sup>478</sup> Dennis B. Guernsey, "Family ministry and a theology of the family: a personal journey," *Direction* 19, no. 1 (March 1990).

re-socialization of children and adolescents. Fourth, ministries help families mediate between the forces of contemporary life and the historic traditions of the faith.<sup>479</sup>

A theology of family ministry for single African American mothers is also represented in the churches' liturgies and rituals. I noted in the previous chapter that rituals for enfranchising grief and loss are necessary for attending to the well being of single African American mothers. It is also important to change rituals and liturgies so that they do not exclude diverse peoples and families in many Black churches. For example, Black churches should use inclusive language in rites of passage for baptisms and baby blessings. Also, some liturgies for baby blessing assume that fathers are present having fathers present. If fathers are not present, an inclusive liturgy would focus on blessing the baby with representatives of the mother's village or network of support.

#### Summary

In this chapter, I described a womanist practical theology of connection for attending to the well being of single African American mothers. I used the narrative of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well as a model with three tasks: enfranchising loss and grief, embracing enlivening images of self and God, and I proposed a more inclusive black church family theology.

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<sup>479</sup> K. Brynolf Lyon and Archie Smith, *Tending the flock: congregations and family ministry*, ed. K. Brynolf Lyon and Archie Smith. The family, religion, and culture (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998).

## Chapter 7

### 7. Pastoral Care and Counseling with Single African American Mothers

#### Introduction

This chapter describes a pastoral care and counseling approach using a revised relationship education curriculum that attends to the well being of single African American mothers. The curriculum is designed as a resource for use within growth groups in black churches. In the first section, I describe a pastoral care and counseling model integrating educative and womanist models of pastoral care and counseling. The second section describes learning goals, objectives, and relevant content. The third section describes the leadership and group process. The final section describes two activities intended to foster growth and healing.

#### Womanist, Educative, and Growth Group Pastoral Care and Counseling

A revised relationship-education curriculum for pastoral care in counseling with single African American mothers combines Howard Clinebell's philosophy of educative pastoral care and counseling in growth groups with womanist approaches to pastoral care and counseling. The educative and womanist models of pastoral care and counseling, unlike, the "banking"<sup>480</sup> philosophy of imparting information evident in existing relationship education curriculums, utilizes the facilitator's pastoral care and counseling skills and sensitivities to help each single African American mothers understand, evaluate, and apply the curriculums content to her particular life situation and any

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<sup>480</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 72. The banking method is a philosophy of education where education is the act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits, which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat.

underlying social injustices that effect her well being.<sup>481</sup> Educative pastoral care and counseling has three goals: discovering the facts, concepts, values, beliefs, skills, guidance, or advice that is needed by persons to cope with problems; communicating these directly or helping persons discover them; and helping persons utilize this information to understand situations, make wise decisions, or constructively handle problems.<sup>482</sup> Growth groups help participants use more of our latent resources to enliven their relationships.<sup>483</sup> They have eight characteristics:

1. The emotional, interpersonal, intellectual, and spiritual growth of participants
2. A growth-facilitating style of leadership by the group leader and eventually the entire group so that the group itself becomes the instrument of growth
3. The growth-orientation is the guiding perspective so that the emphasis is more unused potential, here and now effectiveness in living, and future goals than on past failures, problems and pathology
4. The group is composed of relatively functional people so that its aim is “making well people better.”
5. It is small enough to allow group trust and depth relationships to develop
6. There is a two-way movement from personal feelings to relevant content
7. Apply learning from group experiences to relationships outside the group is encouraged as an essential part of personal growth
8. The group encourages constructive changes in both attitudes and feelings on the one hand, and in behavior and relationships on the other.<sup>484</sup>

Clinebell notes that growth groups have a balanced emphasis on three interdependent dimensions of human development: *inreach*, *outreach*, and *upreach*. *Inreach* refers to growth in awareness or coming alive to oneself and relating responsibly and responsively

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<sup>481</sup> Clinebell, *Basic types of pastoral care & counseling*.

<sup>482</sup> Clinebell, *Basic types of pastoral care & counseling*, 349.

<sup>483</sup> Clinebell, *The people dynamic*, 3.

<sup>484</sup> Clinebell, *The people dynamic*, 3.

to oneself by taking one's own feelings and needs seriously; *outreach* means relating responsibly and responsively to others; and *upreach* refers to growth of a stronger, more trustful connection with God.<sup>485</sup> The guiding purpose of growth groups is to enhance the quality of life for each participant and help them participant become fully alive by:

Becoming aware by being in touch with feelings and body; relating with others in depth; being authentic, open and congruent; loving by spontaneously caring and giving myself in relationships; enjoying pleasure, playing, and celebrating life; becoming spontaneous and free to experience and to choose; creating or making or doing something satisfying and or significant; risking by adventuring in the present and being enriched by the past and future; coping responsibly with circumstances; connecting with nature, other humans, and God; and growing toward using more of one's potentialities.<sup>486</sup>

Single African American mothers will use the revised relationship education curriculum and the accompanying exercises to reinforce relationship skill building by incorporating womanist principles of womanist pastoral care and counseling to ensure that telling her own story validates each woman.<sup>487</sup> This narrative approach to womanist pastoral care and counseling is in concert with what Hopkins and Koppel call storytelling as the heart of pastoral care and counseling. "Stories center the pastoral care encounter, offering points of reflection for self-perception and understanding. Pastoral care givers do not engage in "extreme makeovers" of the psyche, but rather help organize and frame our understanding of ourselves, the world, the way we speak about it, and the way we relate to God."<sup>488</sup> A narrative entry point taps into her latent story to help her see value

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<sup>485</sup> Clinebell, *The people dynamic*, 3.

<sup>486</sup> Clinebell, *The people dynamic*, 6.

<sup>487</sup> Wiggins and Williams, "Constructing New Realities," 307.

<sup>488</sup> Denise Dombkowski Hopkins and Michael S. Koppel, *Grounded in the living Word: the Old*



conflicts or injustices in her life.<sup>489</sup> Narrative, as an essential aspect of WomanistCare, is essential for healing and transforming single African American mothers.<sup>490</sup> When single African American mothers tell their story through the curriculum and the growth group experience, she can make sense of out what has “felt” like nonsense because by telling her story she begins to make connections between the past and the present by having someone listen to her story and receive it as a gift that is shared so that her value as a human being is appreciated, raised and admired.<sup>491</sup>

### Revised Relationship Education Curriculum

#### Learning Goals and Objectives

The learning goals and objectives for a revised relationship education curriculum for single African American others include:

- Discuss and critically evaluate how relationships skills and coping responses were nurtured in your family of origin
- Discuss and apply appropriate boundaries for expressing thoughts, feelings, and concerns
- Apply communication, problem-solving, and conflict resolution skills in all interpersonal and other important relationships to enhance one’s ability to respond to stressful situations that threaten emotional, physical, and spiritual wellbeing
- Analyze and dispel myths and stereotypes about single African American mothers
- Discuss and ritualize experiences of grief and loss
- Construct and affirm healthier images of self, images of mother, and images of God
- Foster group relationships to model relationship skills and caring community
- Discuss and apply tools for managing time and allowing for intentional self-care

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*Testament and pastoral care practices* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 6.

<sup>489</sup> Christie Cozad Neuger, *Counseling women: a narrative, pastoral approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 50.

<sup>490</sup> Foster-Boyd, "Womanistcare," 199.

<sup>491</sup> Hollies, *Womanistcare*, 4.

## Content

Growth group content stimulates interaction and helps group members share feelings, struggles, hopes and goals.<sup>492</sup> The content in a revised relationship education curriculum for single African American mothers focuses on building relationship skills across all relationships utilizing lectures, discussion, and interactive exercises. Specific attention is given to building listening, conflict resolution, and problem solving skills. While there are other skills included in the curriculum, these three skills are highlighted because of the way in which improving them can have a profound effect on how they can improve communication for discussing shared custody and negotiating financial support with the fathers of their children. Improving listening, conflict resolution, and problem solving includes discussions about how these skills were modeled in families of origin.

An element of the second part of womanist declares that a womanist “appreciates and prefers ... women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength.”<sup>493</sup> This supports the inclusion of content that helps single African American mothers move beyond embodied and essentialized notions of strength towards embodying authenticity, vulnerability, and the appropriate boundaries that are needed to express thoughts, feelings, and concerns within the group as a model for authentic self-expression outside of the group.

Snorton notes that understanding the historical and conceptual understanding of images ascribed to African-American women is an important activity of pastoral care.<sup>494</sup> Thus the revised curriculum includes content to help participants discuss the ways in

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<sup>492</sup> Clinebell, *The people dynamic*, 5.

<sup>493</sup> Walker, *In search of our mothers' gardens*, xi-xii.

<sup>494</sup> Snorton, "The legacy of the African-American matriarch," 52.

which the history and origin of myth and stereotypes about single African American mothers has effected their images of mothers and their interpersonal relationships. Additional content related to this history allows for discussions among group members on loss and grief.

The revised curriculum's content can help single African American others construct healthier images of self, mothers, and God. Williams et al. note that it is important to provide single African American mothers with the skills to combat self-hatred and shield them from negative cultural beliefs by reintroducing archetypes that expand the racial and gender aesthetic of African American women to help them develop positive self-images.<sup>495</sup> The Bible is a rich resource for helping single African American mothers construct these images as Hopkins and Koppel explains,

Biblical texts remind us of our identity as God's beloved people even as we know ourselves through periods of wandering, grief, and rebellion as well as pain, joy, and thanksgiving. By helping people see how their individual stories intersect with biblical stories, we engage in the most basic forms of pastoral care and biblical interpretation. When we feel connected to biblical stories the Bible can give us words for the journey through the cacophony of our world. Sometimes the text gives us words that we may not otherwise have had. Sometimes the text affirms what we already know to be true. Sometimes the words challenge our current world or personal situation.<sup>496</sup>

They add that "connecting people to biblical stories can gathers the fragments of their lives and open within them more space to be all that God wants them to be ... biblical stories can help us identify and transform unhealthy individual stories even for those who are not familiar with the Bible."<sup>497</sup> An example of content that helps single African American mothers broaden their God images to see the maternal and feminine

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<sup>495</sup> Carmen Braun Williams, Marsha Wiggins Frame, and Evelyn Green, "Counseling Groups for African American Women: A Focus on Spirituality," *Journal for Specialists in Group Work* 24, no. 3 (January 1999): 265.

<sup>496</sup> Hopkins and Koppel, *Grounded in the living Word*, 5.

<sup>497</sup> Hopkins and Koppel, *Grounded in the living Word*, 6.

characteristics of God is in Isaiah 66:13: "As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem." Or Deuteronomy 32:18: "You were unmindful of the Rock that bore you; you forgot the God who gave you birth." The content that empowers single African American mothers to construct healthier images of themselves as mothers also comes from comparing and contrasting scriptural examples of good and bad mothers.

### Leadership and Growth-Group Process

The leader of a single-African-American-mother growth group is ideally a single African American mother who has realized her own healing. She is intentional about creating a safe, secure, and trusting atmosphere so that the goal of allowing for the expression of thoughts feelings and concerns is operative in the group process. Though Gainor asserts groups are powerful for connecting African American women because of the immediate sense of sisterhood, a sense of belonging, and shared history.<sup>498</sup> She also acknowledges that it is challenging to create "sufficient frequency, intensity, and continuity of experience so the process of becoming a group will operate"<sup>499</sup> because racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and familism can result in internalized oppression and become a divisive focus on the differences among them.<sup>500</sup> This oppression and division occurs when single African American mothers live out the inaccurate myths and stereotypes imposed on them. For example, the diversity of the research participant's age, class, sexual orientation, family systems, and circumstances in which the women became single mothers demonstrates the kind of diversity that can be

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<sup>498</sup> Kathy A. Gainor, "Internalized oppression as a barrier to effective group work with black women," *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work* 17, no. 4 (November 1992): 235.

<sup>499</sup> Clinebell, *The people dynamic*, 18.

<sup>500</sup> Gainor, "Internalized oppression," 235.

represented in growth groups. This diversity of “isms” along with their respective values, beliefs, and assumptions about themselves, God, and the world could interfere with group cohesion if the women project their internalized oppression on each other or the group leader in an effort to undermine their own process of change and healing. Thus, this kind of projection creates conflict and threatens the safety of the group in a way that may result in some women refusing to take part in discussions or exercises because they may feel attacked.

Although we can hope that shared experiences of being single African American mothers is sufficient for helping the women build the kind of relationship skills that allow them to become more authentic and vulnerable, leaders of growth groups for single African American mothers should be prepared for the possibility culturally relevant content and exercises alone will not be enough to help the women heal and learn new ways of being. In order to prevent projections of internalized oppression from interfering with group cohesion, the leader must emphasize the process of deconstruction and consciousness when discussing the history of myths and stereotypes about single African American mothers. In this sense, the confrontation element of WomanistCare helps the women take personal responsibility for their choices and behaviors.<sup>501</sup> The hope is that the content not only fosters empathy within the women but also the leaders will have the necessary training to make sure empathy reigns throughout the group process.

#### Exercises to Foster Growth and Healing

Interactive exercises promote active involvement, promote self-reflection, and increase self-awareness, self-knowledge, and self-understanding.<sup>502</sup> Exercises are used

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<sup>501</sup> Foster-Boyd, "Womanistcare," 201.

<sup>502</sup> Nina W. Brown, *Psychoeducational groups* (Philadelphia: Accelerated Development, 1998),

throughout the sixteen-week group to increase the retention of the material and skills and “reinforcement also contributes to the likelihood of the learned behavior being repeated.”<sup>503</sup> Many exercises will be used over the time the group meets, however, three exercises in particular can help facilitate growth and healing from cultural and relational trauma. The first two exercises help promote self-reflection and increase self-awareness through the “dignity, worth and value” wall and ‘life giving conversations.’ In this exercise, each participant creates a collage of words and pictures representing their dignity, worth, and value as African American women and mothers. They spend the first half of the session creating collages and the second part of the session sharing their thoughts, feelings, and the meaning derived from the pictures and words. After each woman shares, the entire group offers words of support and affirmation. “Life-giving conversations” are a weekly homework assignment where women posts life-giving affirmations in the form of quotes by famous African American women, inspiration from the Bible, or their own encouraging and uplifting words, in a prominent place in their home. At the beginning of each session, the woman shares her conversation as part of the opening and closing rituals.

The third group activity facilitates grief and healing from relational trauma. In this activity, the facilitator discusses seven types of loss: relational, material, systemic, role, functional, intrapsychic, and ambiguous. Through loss-related music and bible scriptures, focusing on grief, each woman identifies her losses and creates a prayer or poem of lament to share with the larger group.

### Summary

This chapter described the learning goals, objectives, and contents of a revised relationship education curriculum for group pastoral care and counseling with single African American mothers. The group leader and group process as well as three exercises for fostering growth and healing from cultural and relational trauma were also described. In the next chapter, I summarize the dissertation's findings and discuss opportunities for future research.

## Chapter 8

### 8. Dissertation Summary

#### Conclusion and Reflections

When I embarked on this study, I wanted to know why there were so many social problems in the African American community. I theorized that these problems were connected the vestiges of 400 years of chattel slavery and the oppression that ensued. This was too broad to answer in the limited amount of space that I was afforded, so I eventually narrowed it to interpersonal relationships through an analysis of the U.S. government's Healthy Marriage Initiative (HMI) and the African American Healthy Marriage Initiative (AAHMI). These programs received an immense amount of funding to teach relationship skills on the premise that single [African American] mothers are the reason for the social problems that persist in low-income communities [of color]. The bold plan of the HMI/AAHMI seeks to rectify this problem by teaching the skills that are necessary for healthy relationships and marriages. The concern is that children fare better when they are raised in a traditional nuclear family of a married man and woman. I discovered that this rhetoric is about family values. That is, the nuclear family is the cultural norm for families and those who do not conform to this norm are considered deviant.

My research included many twists and turns as I discovered that the U.S. government was not interested in the well being of single African American mothers or their children. On the surface, it appeared that the HMI/AAHMI was created for them, since it was believed that single African American mothers populated the welfare rolls. Research confirmed that single African American mothers are the reason why the government reformed the family subsidy program under the Clinton administration and



continued under the Bush administration. It was apparent that excluding them from a program that could benefit them and their children was another form of oppression. I concluded this because my research eventually took me back to slavery and the treatment of African American women and African American mothers. Throughout history, African American women have been subjected to dehumanizing cultural controlling images, and their bodies have been exploited for economic gain through horrific acts of relational traumas.

After my conversations with my research participants, I confirmed that though they did not name the images as presented in the literature, they are aware that negative perceptions about single African American mothers permeate their lives and relationships. One of the surprises of the study, which emerged after my analysis of the transcripts, was learning that grief and loss were a large part of their suffering. While in some ways I could prove my theory of cultural trauma, I was not sure how relational trauma was fully manifested in their lives. Here is a summary of my findings:

I began the study by discussing the problem of using the village metaphor because, I argued, it romanticizes and hides suffering in the lives of single African American mothers. This was followed an overview of the HMI/AAMHI philosophy of “family values,” an exclusionary term used to marginalize all families that do not conform the nuclear family ideal. I described the problem of this philosophy as the main factor contributing to the marginalization of single African American mothers. I noted how the HMI/AAHMI’s programs exclude single African American mothers and their children (because the mothers are not married), even though their children are deemed the problem. Unless they choose to get married, they cannot benefit from potentially

improving their relationships skill, well being, and the well being of their children through RE programs.

I presented my thesis, arguing that single mothers and their children and their children are the primary family form in the African American community, and that these mothers suffer from cultural and relational trauma while raising over half of the African American children under eighteen, and that these mothers and their families are in need of support from the Black church. After defining relevant terms, I reviewed literature that was situated within the broader multidisciplinary literature related to single African American mothers.

In chapter two, I outlined the dissertation's hermeneutical and empirical methods. I provided my rationale for the dissertation's practical theological approach using Osmer's four-task method and my rationale for using Sheppard's womanist practical theology of embodiment as my secondary method. I described interpretive phenomenological analysis, including my selection procedure for my research participants, data collection, and data analysis.

In chapter three I described my ten research participants, summarized the six superordinate themes that emerged during my analysis of the interview transcripts: challenges; feeling judged and stigmatized; coping with the challenges and the stereotypes; trauma, loss, and abandonment; self-evaluation; and experience of God, religion, and church.

In chapter four, I conducted a psychosocial and historical analysis of cultural trauma. I found that single African American mothers resist dehumanizing controlling images by embodying the controlling image of the *strong black woman*. I concluded that

embodying the *strong black woman* is a form of oppression and disenfranchisement sanctioned by society and religion to obscure the pain and suffering from experiences of relational trauma.

In chapter five, I conducted a psychosocial and historical analysis of two components of relational trauma: interpersonal violence; and ambiguous and disenfranchised loss. I then discussed disenfranchised grief as the response to relational trauma. I concluded this chapter with a discussion of the black church and relational trauma.

In chapter six, I offered a theological reflection on John 4, Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well as a womanist model for attending to the well being of single African American mothers. This provided a model to enfranchise loss, grief, and to provide norms for embodying healthy self-images and mother images. I concluded this chapter with ethical and spiritual norms for a family theology inclusive of single African American mothers.

In chapter seven, I described elements that can augment relationship education curricula for more effective pastoral care and counseling with single African American mothers in Black Churches.

#### Future Research

There are many opportunities for future research. I feel like I only scratched the surface of all that emerged from my research participants and literature review. One of the issues that I would like to study more is the effect of fatherlessness on the children of single African American mothers. I did not focus on children of single African American mother, but it was somewhat evident in my interviews with the women that the absence

of a father figure in their own lives influenced their own relationships and well being. I focused on the well being of single African American mothers, yet during my interviews with the research participants, I also found complicated relationships with their mothers and generational differences in parenting. Some of the women made intentional changes for cultivating relationships with their own children, primarily their daughters, changes fueled by a sense that they were not nurtured by their mothers.

## Appendixes

### A. Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. How did you come to be a single mother?
2. What has been your experience as a single African American mother?
3. Please tell me about your significant relationships?
4. If you have had any experience that you consider abuse, please describe.
5. What are your thoughts and feelings about religion/spirituality?
6. Please describe your church experience and participation?
7. What are your thoughts and feelings about how single African American mothers are depicted in the African American community, the media and in society?
8. Would you share your thoughts and feelings about why there are a disproportionate number of single African American mothers as compared to other racial and ethnic groups?

## B. Letter of Informed Consent

**Protocol Title:** "*Behind the Veil of the Village: A Womanist Pastoral Theological Analysis of Single African American Mothers, Cultural and Relational Trauma, and Relationship Education Programs*"

**Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.**

**What the study is about:** This study describe the historical, cultural, and relational development of the African American family with a particular focus on single African American mothers. The project describes their overall experience including relationships with their children, parents, significant others, and their relationship to the church, the African American community and society. For the purposes of this research project, I define *single* as African American mothers with full parenting responsibility, regardless of marital status. The project makes suggestions for the content of a relationship education curriculum that the church can offer as a resource for pastoral care and counseling.

**What you will be asked to do:** I am a doctoral candidate at the Claremont School of Theology, and I would like to interview you about your life as a single mother. You will be asked to describe your relationships with your parents, children and significant others; your experience and participation in your church community; and your thoughts and feelings about how you are perceived in the African American community, the media and society. You will be asked to evaluate sociological and psychological theories about the disproportionate number of single African American mothers in the African American community. This takes about ninety minutes of your time. I may also contact you in the future for the purposes of clarifying something from this interview. I need your consent to conduct this interview, to contact you again, and to audiotape the interview.

**Risks:** You may be experience some discomfort in answering some of the questions. The interview is voluntary and you may decide not to answer certain questions; you also might decide at any point to end the interview. Your participation in this study is voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating or for choosing not to answer any of the questions.

**Your answers are confidential:** Your identity is kept confidential to the extent provided by law. The records of this study will be kept private. Data will be kept on tape recorders and then destroyed once the discussions have been fully transcribed. Transcriptions of the discussion will be kept on a personal computer to which only the researcher has access. Any report of this research that is made available to the public will not include your name or any other individual information by which you could be identified.

**If you have questions or want a copy or summary of the study results:** Contact the researcher Trina Armstrong, 1850 West Arrow Route #127 Upland, CA 91786 or [trina.armstrong@cst.edu](mailto:trina.armstrong@cst.edu) 909-753-5589. You will be given a copy of this form to keep for

your records. If you have any questions about whether you have been treated in an illegal or unethical way, contact: the Claremont School of Theology Institutional Research Board chair; Dr. Kathleen Greider, the Chair of my dissertation, at 909-447-2540; or the Dr. Phillip Clayton, Vice-President for Academic Affairs and Dean at 909-447-2521.

**Agreement:** I have read about this study described in the letter above. I voluntarily agree to participate:

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Participant's Signature

Date

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Investigators Signature

Date

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